

JOHN W MEFFORD



**AT
LARGE**

**AN
ALEX TROUT
THRILLER**

AT Large

An Alex Troutt Thriller

Book 2

Redemption Thriller Series - 2
(Includes Alex Troutt Thrillers, Ivy Nash Thrillers,
and Ozzie Novak Thrillers)

By
John W. Mefford

ALSO BY JOHN W. MEFFORD

Redemption Thriller Series

The Alex Troutt Thrillers

AT Bay (Book 1)
AT Large (Book 2)
AT Once (Book 3)
AT Dawn (Book 4)
AT Dusk (Book 5)
AT Last (Book 6)

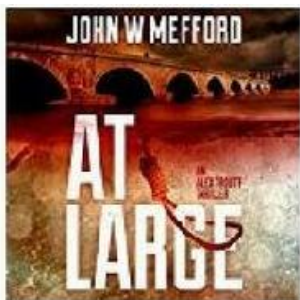
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1

I had one shot for the kill, and I wasn't going to screw it up.

Anchoring my right foot as I lowered my center of gravity, I took a hard swallow, releasing a crackle in my ears. The images that had flooded my mind on the three previous shots—the same pictures that invaded my dreams and disrupted my sleep—were now vapor.

Except for one.

I blinked my eyes, and a single drop of perspiration trickled down my forehead, stopping at my hardened eyebrow. The rush of intensity had draped my body in a coat of sweat. I could feel the muscles in my jaw flinch as I fought back the same swell of emotion that had gripped me every night for the last two months.

Fuck!

Mark's face. Pasty white with skin that appeared rippled with pain. His mane of hair drifting in the shallow bay water. But it was his unblinking eyes that seemed to call out to me, maybe to anyone, to save him from the worst death imaginable. Drowning.

Frozen eyes of death. They had bored a hole in me, still bore a hole in me. And for what reason? He was a lying sack of shit. He'd mocked our marriage, not just once, not with a woman he claimed he loved. It had been a flock of women, as best I could tell, including our free-spirited nanny. And I knew that much without investigating the breadth or depth of his infidelity. The bimbos had come looking for me.

Fuck!

It was happening again. The anger and resentment, the deep-seated sadness, had rendered me useless. I was so worked up, I could have ripped apart steel with my teeth. The daily workout routines helped, as did the sparring sessions with one of the best ju-jitsu instructors in Boston. But I couldn't shake it completely.

The downward spiral typically started with my mind coiled around that single image—his lifeless eyes. But it was all in my head. I'd yet to actually view the crime scene photos of Mark's dead body floating in Nahant Bay. But I'd seen the other cadavers, and my imagination had conjured up the most lifelike death scene possible for Mark.

"Special Agent Troutt, are you going to complete your firearm test?"

A booming voice echoed in the vast concrete chamber where FBI special agents recertified their ability to carry an FBI-issued sidearm.

"Yes sir!" I barked in return, using the explosion of energy to ignite my focus.

My hands on the Beavertail grip, I set my sights on the target dangling from a wire twenty-five yards in front of me. I needed to nail this last shot to stay legal, and to save face. I'd talked my way back onto the Violent Crimes Squad for reasons I couldn't completely explain, especially when I'd pondered the idea of walking away from the FBI. I wasn't about to let everyone think my skills had eroded, or that I'd allowed the emotion of the events two months ago to eat away at my mental stability. My memory from before the crash—the car accident that had rendered me in a coma and partially amnesiac, and that had set up the strange volley of events that transpired afterward—wasn't fully restored. Yet, I couldn't keep myself from recalling every image, word spoken, or feeling since I woke up.

“Is the little bitch going to curl up in a ball and suck her thumb?”

I ignored the dig from the biggest dipshit I knew. He'd been my boss ever so briefly and probably thought he was motivating me.

Fuck him.

I blinked once, and in a split second, I felt the warmth of the summer sun beaming down on me as I swayed in the ocean beach water. Seagulls chirped overhead, and kids frolicked in the water off in the distance. I was eight or nine years old.

I'd found my special place of peace and calm.

Now confident that I'd momentarily buried my demons, I flipped my attention to the black and red target. I took in a purposeful breath, then heard the air release through my nose. My heart rate had finally retreated to a whisper. I pulled the trigger. The end of the barrel flashed as my shoulders withheld most of the kickback. I tossed my goggles to the side, pulled out my earplugs, and leaned forward.

“Dead center. Kill shot,” a voice said through the speakers.

I placed my Glock 22 on the counter and nearly let a smile part my lips.

“You were just toying with us at first, right?” My old partner, Nick, pulled up behind me, his arms splayed wide.

I paused before answering that question, my eyes nearly blinded by Nick's color coordination, or lack thereof. “Toying? You're wearing a blue and white polka-dot tie. Add in your green suspenders and you look like a clown.”

His jaw opened slightly, and I shrugged my shoulders, knowing I'd purposely held back from teasing him about his ever-shrinking red tuft of hair.

Before Nick could get any words out, we were interrupted by the douche bag, Randy. “You're either starting to lose your skills or you just like teasing us.” The ogre stroked his oversized mustache and gave me a subtle wink, then flipped a toothpick in his mouth.

I rolled my eyes so the world could see.

“Me? I think you just like teasing people, Alex,” Randy said quietly as he walked past me and called out for someone in the distance. His warm breath lingered in my ear.

On pure instinct, I kicked out my foot, catching Randy on a down step. He tripped forward, lifting his arms just before his head bashed against a glass window behind us.

“Oh, sorry. Our feet got tangled up, Randy. You okay? Or are you just getting too old to walk in a straight line?” I shifted closer to him, so he could see the steely stare of my blue eyes.

He jumped to his feet and moved to within a foot of my face. I didn’t back away. Why the hell should I?

“Giordano, Troutt, or whatever you’re calling yourself now, you just crossed the line.”

I couldn’t help but stare at his finger that was jabbing the air just inches from my breast. I inhaled, trying to extend my chest a little farther, hoping that he’d connect with my body. I could feel my adrenaline surging, ready to launch my knee upward, to ram his gonads into the back of his throat.

“Get over yourself, Randy. You crossed the line with me long ago.”

He gnawed on his toothpick like cud, then shifted it to the other side of his mouth, likely pondering what to say or how he could try to outsmart me without coming across as a bigot in front of a growing crowd of FBI personnel.

From what Nick had informed me about my pre-crash life, Randy apparently had shown me some of his suave moves. Or had tried to. I didn’t recall ever reciprocating his interest, and the thought of it literally made me want to puke. But I’d never asked him about it either. I didn’t want to know the truth—only the truth I thought I knew.

“Are you on the rag or something, Alex?” He snickered to a couple of square-headed minions behind him, then turned back around and eyed me head to toe. “Then again, maybe that time has come and gone.” He gave me another cheesy wink.

Inching closer, I could feel a hand on my shoulder. “Alex, he’s an SSA, and he’s not worth it,” Nick said under his breath.

Nick was right, at least partly, in that Randy was a supervisory special agent over the newly formed Boston Critical Incident Response Team. He’d once led the Violent Crimes Squad, my new home. But given Randy’s nonstop digs at me, I wasn’t about to cower to him, even if he was about eight inches taller than me.

“You know what, Randy?”

“What’s that, Giorda—”

“It’s Troutt, asswipe.”

“Yes sir, Pouty Troutty.” He gave me a three-finger salute while chuckling out loud.

How did he know about that nickname? I wanted to quickly flip around and question whether Nick had shared my longtime secret of how I’d been teased as a kid. But I couldn’t let Randy know it bothered me.

“It’s nice to see your maturity level finally match your single-digit IQ.”

I received a few oohs and ahhs on that one.

“Listen, b—”

“Zip it, Randy, or I’m going to shut you up once and for all.”

Twisting his head, he shifted his eyes to the gun range. “You mean a duel of some kind? It’s on, sister. It’s on.”

“That wouldn’t be fair,” I said over a murmur in the crowd.

“Didn’t think so, I would have—”

“Spare me, dipshit. You know and I know I’d kick your ass in a shooting contest. Hands down.”

“Want to make a bet?”

“I don’t like taking candy from babies. I’m talking about a real fight. You and me in the ring of death.”

His face actually twitched.

“Hadn’t heard that term since your training in Quantico, huh?”

He started nodding, slowly.

“Just you, me, and a referee. No fans cheering you on. The ring of death. Can you get up for it?”

Randy’s nostrils flared.

I held up the tip of my pinkie. “Two weeks. And leave your toothpick at home. I wouldn’t want you to impale yourself.”

I flipped on my heels and shoved my way through a sea of observers. With my heart chugging at maximum speed, I desperately craved fresh air. But at the end of the procession, I spotted a small hand raised in the air.

“You go, girl.”

A miniature lady in a silk blouse and plaid skirt glanced up at her own hand. I smacked it and kept walking. “Thanks.”

A minute later, I popped open the front door of One Center Plaza in Boston’s West End and took in a chilly dose of air, just as a bus motored by, leaving a gray plume of exhaust in its wake.

I coughed before I completed one full breath.

“Damn, you kicked his ass. About time someone did.” The lady from the firing range had sidled up next to me, one arm full of folders and notebooks. Her pinched voice matched her diminutive stature.

Before I could reply, my coughs overtook me. I held up a finger, needing a second to get my breathing in order.

“Hey, Alex. Everything good?”

My hands went to my knees as I hacked up a lung. I looked up to see my old buddy, Brad, approaching. A twenty-something intelligence analyst, he’d played a pivotal role in bringing down the perp in what became known as the ring killings. Brad had this easy-going, all-American look about him. Wavy, blond hair, a chiseled physique, and a couple of cute dimples were among his most noticeable traits. But he also happened to be a sweet guy, and every female seemed to notice.

“Just sucked in some toxic fumes, that’s all.” I sounded like I’d

swallowed a toad, and tears started flowing from lack of oxygen. Within seconds, Brad offered me a handkerchief.

Another quick image shot across my memory bow of my dad offering me his handkerchief. It had grossed me out then, and Brad's offer must have elicited a similar facial expression.

"I'm good," I said.

"I'll take it, Brad." The woman snatched the handkerchief from his hand and dabbed her forehead, as if she'd been perspiring. It was March; we'd just had a fresh two inches of snow the previous night, and our space was filled with the smoke from our collective breaths.

I think someone had a crush.

"Oh, okay, Gretchen." Brad knew her, but still seemed a tad surprised.

Just then, the doors burst open again, and I could hear the thick Boston accent of my old boss, Jerry, booming above all others.

"We're going to happy hour," he declared.

"I got kids, remember?" I moved to a standing position, knowing I was good at providing a solid excuse for anything social these days. "I'll take a rain check."

"The hell you are. I know you've got help at home now, Alex. You're coming to happy hour if I have to pick you up and carry you there."

Minutes later, we pulled up to the last place I had seen my husband alive.

“Here’s to...me.” Jerry raised a shot of Irish whiskey to the group of FBI employees gathered around the table at Monty’s, a well-appointed bar located in Back Bay. Just two months earlier, I’d seen Mark exit this building with a woman attached to his hip. They disappeared into the back of a dark sedan. A winter storm had just rolled in, which greatly impaired my ability to follow the car, but not as much as the sedan that ran me off the road—the second one in just a few weeks. Not two hours later, Mark died at the hands of a nut job with an obsession toward numbers.

“Alex, you with us?” Nick nudged me with his elbow.

I joined the crowd. “To Jerry,” the crowd said.

Sitting at the head of the rectangular wooden table, Jerry rested an arm over the back of his chair. I’d never seen him so jovial or relaxed. The four shots of whiskey probably contributed, but he’d recently shared that it was official: he’d been named SSA over the Violent Crimes Squad. He was most recently my boss in the White Collar and Art Theft squads. Somehow he’d convinced FBI brass that he could handle all three gigs.

“Hey, Jerry, do you always like to follow in my footsteps?” I said with a wink.

“Tease me all you want. I’m just glad to be back in the game.”

It seemed like that was Jerry’s way of saying he’d been in the FBI doghouse. I couldn’t say for certain, especially since my memory of internal politics remained dormant. Or was it that I didn’t give a shit?

Pulling my phone from my purple Kate Spade bag, I checked for any text messages from my kids, Luke and Erin. Nothing. They must be doing okay.

“No worries, Alex. You deserve a couple hours of fun,” Nick said.

I pressed my lips against my teeth. “I guess.”

“Really? You’ve got Ezzy taking care of the kids and the homestead now. You’re allowed to relax, you know.”

I nodded, realizing my guilt factor had sabotaged my life...again. For reasons that were difficult to acknowledge, I partially blamed myself for Mark’s death. I glanced around the table and saw a horde of folks who I knew had kids. I sipped my water and finally convinced myself to look at the other side of the coin, starting with Ezzy.

“You’re right, Nick. That gray-haired woman saved my ass just as I was about to give up.”

He clinked my water glass and downed the rest of his shot as I recalled the day Ezzy entered our lives...for the second time. I’d been back at work for all of two weeks and my work-home juggling act was failing miserably. The kids were still emotional about their father’s death, which meant that tempers were short and hormones were raging, at least from my teenage daughter,

Erin. Work wasn't much better. I struggled to keep up, which only frustrated me. I wasn't used to being just an average contributor. Not at something as important as...well, all of those things.

The day I decided I wanted to return to the Violent Crimes Squad, Ezzy rang the doorbell at our Salem home. She said a few words, but it wasn't until she hugged me and tears streamed down her face that I recalled her place in our lives. She helped fill in the gaps.

"I was your nanny up until about seven months ago." Her hands moved with each syllable, giving a sort of rhythm to her words. "I remember it vividly. It was a Tuesday, and Mr. Giordano called me at home and told me that my services were no longer needed. When I questioned him, he told me not to contact you. I asked him why, and he only said that if I did, he'd find a way to have my green card rejected and I'd be forced to return to Guatemala, even with all of my family in the United States."

And then I knew. Mark's trickery for removing Ezzy and inserting the bouncy, bubbly flower child, Sydney, wasn't just underhanded. By threatening Ezzy, it was criminal. And it gave me another reason to hate him.

Then why did I still miss him? Or was it that I only missed what I thought we'd shared?

I sipped my water as I heard Jerry's bellowing laughter and then another toast. Glancing around the table, I tried to think like a woman who wasn't shackled to the past. Then I recalled the pleasant man I met when I walked into the bar a couple of months back looking for our perp. The younger Monty.

Just then, the older Monty waddled by, his face etched with pure attitude. Some things never changed. I reached out for him.

"What ya want, lady?" he said as his face curled into a fleshy hairball.

Oh yes, he was all about the customer. "Just wondering where Monty is...your son?"

"Eh." He threw up a hand. "Junior's around here somewhere, doing something. And don't ask me to find him. I'm busy."

He lumbered off, leaving behind a stench that reminded me of a locker room.

For a moment, I chastised myself for even thinking about another guy. I looked around and noticed Gretchen, who must have been ten years my senior, sitting across from Brad, ogling him. I almost offered her a spit bag to hold her drool.

"You're that FBI agent, aren't you?"

The beanpole waitress I'd met the night I was introduced to Monty Junior was balancing a tray of about ten beers.

"Yes, how are you doing?"

"Struggling at the moment. I was standing next to Monty Junior when you guys came in, and he actually pointed you out. I'm sure he'll be around to talk to you," she said with a wink. "Gotta run."

He noticed me?

I scooted a little higher in my chair.

Nick leaned in and asked, "What are you smiling about?"

"I'm not smiling."

"Okay, why are your lips doing this?" He pushed the edges of his mouth upward, revealing spotty gums that could have belonged to a canine.

"It's nothing, Nick." I patted him on the shoulder and he rejoined the celebration.

I pushed my chair back. "You're not leaving yet, Alex, are you?" Jerry roared from the far end of the table.

"Going to the little girl's room, that's all."

As I spotted the hallway with the restrooms and started to move in that direction, I felt a tug on my arm. "Mind if I bend your ear? Need some girl advice about...you know." Gretchen's smile was so intense I couldn't see the color of her eyes.

"Sure." I looked down at her and immediately felt like an Amazon woman, even though I stood just five six.

We maneuvered through the crowd, trying to avoid swinging elbows and fast-moving busboys. Without appearing too obvious, I craned my neck, hoping to spot Monty Junior. What I would say to him if I ran into him, I had no clue. For all I knew, he'd only want to use a possible connection I had with the government to ease a zoning restriction or take care of a speeding ticket. Of course, I had no pull in that world.

"Down this way," Gretchen said, practically yanking my arm as she turned down a hallway lined with framed pictures of people who'd been patrons of Monty's.

Even with Gretchen pulling me along like I was a reluctant child headed to the dentist, my eyes spotted a picture on the wall of Tom Brady standing between both the senior and junior Monty. Hanging at an angle next to that picture was a shot of Ben Affleck, his arms wrapped around the Monty men. I started to point, shocked to see Senior wearing a massive smile. It almost didn't look like him.

"Did you see—"

"Let's go." Gretchen's little body angled forward, and we stumbled into the ladies' room.

"Damn, I guess you really gotta go." I found myself in front of the mirror. Gretchen and I locked eyes through the reflection.

"Hell no, I don't need to go to the bathroom."

"Well, I kind of do."

She rolled her eyes and let out an exhaustive breath. "If you must."

I paused, wondering what had gotten into the sweet little woman who was all about girls sticking together.

I did my thing, and we met back at the sinks, where she had pulled out her makeup bag and was reapplying her eyeliner, rouge...the whole works.

“Something on your mind?” I ripped a paper towel off the rack, turned, and leaned against the counter.

Now working on her eyelashes, she paused mid-stroke and eyed me through the mirror. “I want to get laid.”

I coughed out loud, choking on my saliva, or maybe the bluntness of her message.

“Okay. I’m not really a candidate.”

“I know you’re joking,” she said, sounding like Minnie Mouse the more I heard her speak.

I tried to release a chuckle at the end of my coughing spat. “Sorry, just a little tickle in my throat. So, you’re trying to say that you’re on the market and you’d like to start dating. Is that what I’m hearing?”

“Eh. Dating is overrated, although I can’t say I’ve had a lot of experience in the last...” she mumbled.

“I’m sorry.”

“Let’s just say it’s been a while.”

“Since you’ve had a date or...”

She forced out a breath and dropped her shoulders while keeping her eyes on me.

I held up a hand, acknowledging that the details weren’t important.

“Have you marked this date on your calendar...that if something doesn’t happen by today, then it’s time to take pervasive action?”

“Alex, I’m not getting any younger. I know I still got it and all, but eventually I’ll start to show my age. And by that time, I need to have my man on the hook.” She shot me a wink, then had to pry apart her goopy eyelashes.

Running my fingers through my hair, I wondered why I’d been chosen to be Gretchen’s confidante.

“So, you got any ideas?” she asked.

Now I felt more like her personal coach, feeling like I’ve been given the task to map out a specific game plan using Xs and Os, with the goal of getting Gretchen a score.

I looked down and noticed her beige hose and two-inch brown heels that matched the color of her silk blouse, but also dated her entire outfit twenty years. Her hair had the stripes of a tiger. I wanted to ask who had colored her mane, but instead I said, “Are you open-minded about who you...you know?”

Pressing her lips together, she turned to face me. “As a woman, I don’t just sleep around. I want one man and one man only. Brad.”

“Right,” I said, wondering how she was going to pull that off. I kept my initial thoughts to myself.

She reached out and touched my arm, nearly smearing her eyelash dabber on the sleeve of my green and white striped blouse. “Alex, I don’t want to be selfish here. I know Brad’s an amazing guy. But you’ve been through a lot, and if you feel like you want to give him a ride, I can try to find someone else.”

My eyes bugged out for multiple reasons. "I'm not in a riding mood these days," I said, looking away, suddenly wishing I was back at the table listening to Jerry's slobbering toasts.

"It's just that...I saw you looking at him." She shrugged her shoulders.

I could feel my core temperature start to increase. "What? That's nuts. Brad and I work together. We're work friends, nothing more."

She nodded slowly, and I could feel her gaze. A thought just entered my mind.

"So how do you know Brad so well?" I propped my chin on top of my hand.

She giggled like a little girl. "Just transferred here from the New York City office. I'm a staff support specialist, and I've been working alongside Brad for about a month."

"So you kind of work for him, in our strange organizational structure."

"I guess you could say that. But I'm telling you, Alex, it's everything I can do to not throw him into a closet and jump his bones."

She giggled for twenty seconds straight. I tried to laugh with her, but I found myself laughing at her.

"Actually," she said, pausing in between laughs, "I only want to jump on one bone." She hooted so hard she began to squeeze tears through eyes that were no larger than coin slits.

"You want me to help you get Brad's attention?"

"I'd be your best friend for life," she said with a serious tone.

Life. It sounded like a prison sentence.

"So, where do I start?"

Dropping my hand in my pocket, I felt a hair tie. Five minutes later, I said, "Until we have a chance to visit a couple of places to enhance your best features..." I paused a second, trying to think what those might be. "I think you're ready to play the game."

She turned and faced the mirror to take in the minor transformation I'd performed.

Her hair was wet, but pulled back into a tight ponytail, which also happened to pull open her eyes. The top three buttons on her blouse were now open, and I coached her on how to position some toilet paper inside her bra. I also made her take off her hose.

It was a start, but she was beaming. "Thank you, Alex."

I wasn't sure it would do much good. Brad was a cross between Pitt and Cooper, while Gretchen looked like she might be ready to break out in a dance for the Lilliputian cast of *Wizard of Oz*.

Before I could move, she reached up and pulled my neck downward—her version of an appreciative hug.

"Now I've got my confidence back. Nothing can stop me."

A thud pounded the bathroom door, and our heads turned that way. "I guess they don't know the bathroom is for more than one. Let's get out of

here.”

As I reached for the handle, another thud, followed by a desperate groan.

Throwing the door open, the thin waitress from earlier was trying to hold up Monty Senior.

“Help me,” she squawked, as her pencil legs buckled from the pressure of trying to hold him up.

He slowly slid down the wall, knocking pictures to the floor. Glass smashed everywhere.

I got to him just about the time his oversized derriere plopped to the cloudy tile. “Good, it’s probably safest if you stay down there.” I glanced up at the waitress.

“Laverne. My name’s Laverne.” She grabbed my shoulders. “I think he’s having a fucking heart attack.”

“Crap.” I looked down and saw him pulling at his shirt, his chest heaving like an airbag. He was sweating profusely. I took out my phone to call for paramedics as I crouched lower.

His big mitt slapped at my arm, knocking the phone to the floor. Then I heard him mumbling.

“Monty, it will be okay. I need to call the paramedics.”

His mouth opened, but nothing audible. His chin quivered, and I instantly felt sorry for the guy, even if he was an ass.

“How long has he been like this?” I asked Laverne.

“Maybe a minute before you came out of the bathroom. Shit, I don’t know. He’d just come in from outside.”

She flicked a wrist behind me. I turned and spotted a metal door with a red exit sign above it.

Senior belted out another groan and grabbed at my shoulder. I crawled to get to my phone, then dialed nine-one-one. A few seconds later I said, “It’s okay, Monty. Help is on the way.”

“Laverne, do you or anyone in this place have any aspirin?”

“Uh, maybe. I know Junior would know. Where is he, dammit?” Her pained face looked back into the bar.

“Chip, get us some aspirin. Quick,” she called out to a younger kid wearing a dirty, white busboy outfit.

He stared down the hallway at us. “I’m on it.” He ran off.

Another groan, this one more like a wailing walrus, and then Senior tugged on my shirt, nearly exposing my breast. If he wasn’t having a heart attack, I would have flipped his arm around and pinned his hand against his back.

“Junior,” he said.

“What? What about Junior?”

“He...he...” Senior’s eyes looked to the door. I handed my phone to Gretchen, who turned and started talking to the operator, who’d finally answered.

I walked back to the door, then glanced back at Senior.

With sweat pouring out of every orifice on his face, he nodded, as if he agreed with the direction I'd moved. Were those tears mixed in with the perspiration?

I gripped the metal handle bar. "Is there something out here?"

"Uhh. Juniorrrr!" He grabbed a fistful of his own shirt and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Dear God, Monty." Laverne put two fingers against his plus-sized neck. "Shit, your pulse is moving so fast I can't keep up. You're like a damn rabbit. And you're burning up."

Just then, Chip raced around the corner, banging into the wall, sending more pictures crashing to floor.

"Here." He tossed the aspirin at Laverne as if they were on fire. Unfortunately, he missed her open hand.

"You dumbass. Help me find them."

Chip dropped to the floor without saying a word, and I ran back over and got on my hands and knees, feeling across the hardwoods. "There," I said, just as my hands spotted the two pills against the baseboard.

"Water. He needs water," Laverne called out.

Chip produced a water bottle off his belt loop, which drew a couple of confused stares. "What? I have to stay hydrated."

Senior downed the two pills, although water trailed out of his mouth and down his bulging neck.

He took in a heaving breath and then pointed a beefy finger at the door.

"Junior!" he yelled with much more clarity.

I moved to the back door and slowly pushed against the bar.

"Alex, do you see anything?" Gretchen asked, pulling up behind me.

"No." In the dark alley, I spotted the outline of three parked cars and two trash bins.

A cat jumped out from behind a tire and scurried into one of the trash bins.

"Shit!" Gretchen dug her nails into my arm as she looked over my shoulder. She'd been startled by the cat.

"Please let go," I said.

"Sorry."

The door bumped against something. I reached at my waist for my Glock but only felt air. I'd left it in my car.

"What is it?" Gretchen asked.

I held my finger to my lips, motioning for quiet. I could feel my pulse thumping at a rapid pace, my body ready to launch toward whatever was behind the door.

Swinging my body around, I landed on both feet, just inches away from a man staring up at me. His eyes didn't blink.

Gretchen gasped. "Holy shit, is he dead?"

“It’s Junior.” A partial moon shone just enough light onto his face. I ran my eyes down his torso. “What the hell? Give me my phone.”

Taking the phone from Gretchen, I tapped the screen, shining a cone of light onto his chest.

“I’m going to hurl.” Gretchen scooted off to the side.

I’d barely taken a breath, when Laverne ran out the door, followed by Nick.

“What the hell is that?” Nick crouched next to me.

I tried looking away for a second. “Someone gutted his chest and tore out his heart. It’s just sitting on top of his ribcage.”

Laverne screamed from behind us.

“What kind of fucking psycho...” Nick let the thought trail off as he moved to a standing position.

I pushed myself to standing; Laverne instantly planted her face into my shoulder.

“Let’s get everyone inside and call the locals so they can process the scene,” I said to Nick.

Laverne peered over my shoulder and began to quiver. “Why...who...?”

“I’m sorry, Laverne. I...I just can’t explain human behavior.”

Quietly, I wondered if we were dealing with something that was more beast than human.

Cutting through Columbus Park on the east side of downtown Boston, she slowed her pace to a leisurely stroll to ensure she blended in with the many other patrons sauntering this way and that. She instantly noticed the fog from her breath thrusting into the nighttime sky.

An obvious sign of exertion. And, she admitted to herself, the result of a fulfilling exhilaration she hadn't experienced in years. She stuck her hands into her pockets of her North Face jacket and focused on reducing the cadence of her air intake.

Taking in the scene, she spotted treetops speckled with remnants of a few flurries that had begun to fall. It might be seventy degrees in Coronado, California, or even eighty in Basra, Iraq, but winter treated Boston like its bitch. It was merciless and unforgiving.

Just like her.

The biting wind hurled invisible spears off the Atlantic. She turned her face in that direction, and her eyes rolled shut as she emptied her lungs. In a near-hypnotic state, a quick playback of what she'd just accomplished flashed through her mind, jolting her back to the present. She couldn't help but feel a tingle permeate her core.

It was almost orgasmic.

She quivered, parting her lips for a brief moment. *Damn, this feels good.*

A scream sliced the frigid air, and she spun on her heels while slapping at her front pocket.

With her adrenaline spigot fully open, her body fell into its natural position, prepared to take on any aggressive action. Her hand fingered the girth of the instrument through the Velcro pocket.

"Oh my God, Paul. What have you done?" A squirming fashionista jumped up and down, her curled locks bouncing off her shoulders, a look of shock and awe covering her face.

The woman instantly relaxed her muscles and took a casual stance.

Thankfully, no one had noticed her assertive response. As she glanced around, a few park dwellers had stopped to take in the scene.

A man, presumably Paul, had dropped to one knee. He held a tiny box in his hands. He lifted his Hollywood chin as if he were ready for someone to start filming.

Fuckin' A. That's exactly what happened. Four, five, maybe six phones came out and started recording this marriage proposal. A special moment not to be forgotten.

It made her want to vomit in her own mouth.

Well, *Paul* would soon develop temporary amnesia about the proposal the next time a piece of ass floated by. That was how the male brain behaved.

The woman in the North Face jacket knew this all too well. She had firsthand knowledge.

And her hands-on experience in this department is what got this party started, right? As she ticked off names and incidents, it was difficult to really nail down what had initiated this unrelenting urge to leave her mark, to right a wrong. Over and over again.

“Karma, you’re my best friend, my confidante, my biggest supporter, and the greatest lover any man could ever wish for.”

What kind of name is Karma?

The twenty-something bobblehead, wearing a red beret and matching Berber coat, whinnied like a horse.

“Paul...I...what’s in that box?” Giggling uncontrollably, the Barbie doll couldn’t help but paw at the box. He playfully gave her a stiff-arm and moved the box to his chest.

“Hold on. There’s more.”

“There can’t be more. I don’t need more,” she said in a breathy tone while giggling at the same time.

“But I can’t help what you’ve done to my life. You truly are the wind that holds up my wings.”

A smattering of oohs and ahhs from the crowd. The woman literally tasted bile in the back of her throat.

“Karma Elizabeth Macy, will you make me the happiest guy in this solar system and be my partner in crime for the rest of our lives?”

He bowed his head as if he were standing before royalty or the Virgin Mary. And the woman knew this bimbo was neither.

“Yes, yes, yes!”

He peeled open the box, and her amber eyes nearly exploded. The moment he slipped the stone on her finger, she jumped his bones, wrapping her legs around Paul’s waist until her boots clapped together. The pair smooched, and the crowd applauded and whistled.

The North Face woman’s mouth was suddenly parched, and she could feel a burning sensation pulsating in her chest. Turning away from the frivolity, she barreled through a horde of gawkers, many of whom were still cheering the young couple.

Once free, she moved toward the darkened sea and sucked in the salty air, only a few twinkles of white and red lights illuminating the harbor.

By the time she reached the end of the park, her breathing had calmed and her mind regained its focus. She approached a food truck that was selling fresh lobster, where she heard one man berating another.

“You piece of shit, this is my truck, and this is my business. You’re nothing more than a throw-away tissue.” The taller man with a widow’s peak bumped his chest against the shorter guy, who turned his cap around.

“Fuck you, Marv. I came up with the idea.” His face was blue and red at the same time.

“Take your idea and get the hell out of my truck.”

“Gladly.” The smaller guy ripped off his apron and tossed it out of the truck, landing it at the woman’s feet. Then he stomped out the side of the truck, leaving a trail of expletives.

“You want something?” The man who could have doubled as Dracula was shouting at her.

She almost laughed.

“Me? I’ve got everything I need.”

“Good, ’cause I’m closing up shop. Fuckin’ prick,” he said to himself, shuffling out of the truck.

She walked over the apron on the ground and kept moving, her gaze returning to the water.

Witnessing the young couple’s proposal was meant to be, as pathetic as it was to watch. It reminded her how the seed of torment had sprouted and devoured her soul. But, she acknowledged, she was a modern woman. One who continued to develop, even as society devolved around her. And that had only brought more clarity. A victim no longer, she could finally envision her path to ultimate fulfillment.

Her own laughter filled the air, then disappeared into the flurried sky. Her checklist had just grown tenfold, and she couldn’t wait to let the world see her from the inside out.

The orange tabby flipped over on its back, spread its legs, and chirped like a wounded bird. With more heft in his jiggling body than Jabba the Hutt, his head appeared unnaturally tiny in comparison.

Blowing out a tired breath, I leaned down and did as he desired of me—I scratched his belly. His oddly strong paws quickly caged my wrist, and he snapped his fangs into my skin.

“Little shit.” I pulled back my arm and stood up, inspecting the five-inch scratch to see if he’d drawn blood. “I’ll never understand that sassy cat.”

“Perhaps he’s taken on the personality of his owner?”

I looked up to see Ezzy walking into the kitchen, her familiar faded pink robe cinched tightly around her waist. Her worn slippers shuffled across the hardwood floor to the counter, where she set down her mug and ambled over to me.

“Let me see that arm of yours.”

Lifting her readers that had been hanging from a chain, she stretched the skin on my forearm, then wet a finger and ran it along the scratch.

“You didn’t flinch. You’re good to go.”

“Thanks, Ezzy. You don’t have to take care of me like I’m a kid. We’ve got two on our hands as it is.”

“Everyone needs a little TLC.”

A tired smile parted my lips. “Not sure you get any TLC.”

“Those two sleeping upstairs, Erin and Luke, they warm my heart. That’s the best kind of TLC a woman can ask for, especially at this age.” She arched a silver eyebrow.

I just shook my head. “You’re not playing fair.”

“What?” She splayed her arms.

“You refuse to tell us your age, but then you act like you’ve hit some milestone birthday. Come on, Ezzy, you’ve been back six weeks. Isn’t it time you share it? You always say we’re family.”

She looked down at Pumpkin, who was rubbing against her shin. “You want a late-night snack, gato? Okay, just this once, I’ll give you a snack.”

As she fed Pumpkin a snack from the drawer, I sifted through the mail Ezzy had organized on the counter.

“Bills, bills, bills,” I said, shuffling the envelopes into one pile and purposely leaving them unopened. “I’ve been living in a dream world, Ezzy. Minus Mark’s income, I think we’re going to have to find a smaller place in a neighborhood without privacy fences or luxury cars parked up and down the street.”

“You worry too much,” she said, shutting the drawer that held Pumpkin’s snacks.

I glanced around our kitchen, noticing the granite countertops, wood floors, fancy china displayed in an antique hutch, and high-end appliances—all acquired when Mark was alive and before I crashed my car and lost my mind, at least a good portion of the long-term memory component.

She was in front of me before I knew it, and grasped my shoulders with both hands. “I can see stress in your eyes. Dr. Alex needs some homemade *pupusas* and then we can talk.”

She’d addressed me with the fancy title the day she returned. Oddly, it sparked a memory for me, or at least a fond feeling inside. She’d apparently always referred to me as Dr. Alex, a term of affection, as it were. She’d watched a long-running daytime Mexican soap opera for more than thirty years, where her favorite character was a strong, independent woman who happened to be named Dr. Alex—Alejandra, to be specific. While it was probably more likely for me to join the professional tennis tour at age thirty-nine than suffer through medical school to get my medical degree, I found it sweet...endearing even.

But that was Ezzy. The kind of person who reminded me that people of character weren’t defined by their bank accounts or social media posts. She was salt of the earth—who happened to use a great deal of said salt in everything she cooked.

I looked over at the five-foot-nothing woman with limitless energy and knew she represented everything in a woman that I couldn’t recall from my own mother—strong values, remarkable insight, and, when necessary, a sharp tongue.

“Just about ready,” she said, as the pan sizzled from the fried tortilla. The sweet and spicy aroma triggered hunger pains.

I found it amazing that she held no grudge against me for how she had been treated by my late husband, nearly booted out of the country under false pretense. Then again, if Mark was still around, she might have a slightly different attitude about the situation.

I filled up my lungs with air, realizing that if Mark were around, I’d guarantee a few choice words to share with him, right before I cut off his little pecker.

“Here you go,” Ezzy said, setting the plate on the bar in front of me.

Before she could join me, I’d already taken two bites.

She sat at the table and slurped her tea. She curled a lock of silver hair around her ear, where I noticed the same set of simple stud earrings she always wore. I’d asked her about them several times, but she acted like it was some big mystery that she wasn’t willing to share, at least not yet.

Outside of a few extra creases and some freckles under her warm eyes, she’d preserved herself rather well. I figured she was in her mid-sixties. Her miniature gait said as much, but I knew not to press the age question.

Setting down her mug, she touched the edge of her lips. “You have a little something.”

I grabbed a paper towel and wiped extra cabbage from my mouth. “This is great, Ezzy. Thank you for staying up and feeding me, although it’s not the healthiest dish you’ve fixed.”

“With my mother being from El Salvador, it has become a family recipe that I share with everyone, friends from back home in Guatemala and my home here with you.” She held up a finger. “Healthy food has more to do with the ingredients, not just some packaged food label spouting this and that. Living a clean life doesn’t mean you can’t eat a fried tortilla. It’s more about living a clean life in here.” She thumped her chest twice and narrowed her chestnut eyes.

The scene from earlier at Monty’s suddenly pinged my frontal lobe. Monty Junior had brown eyes. I took in a slow breath and recalled his cold stare. As much as I tried to ignore the next image, my mind went there. His guts ripped from his body like I’d never seen—not with a human being. His blood-soaked heart just sitting there, a gaping hole in his chest cavity.

Dropping my fork to the plate, I scooted off the barstool and poured myself a glass of red wine. Ezzy rarely drank, and never this late, so I didn’t bother asking if she wanted a glass.

“Your happy hour turned into work, no?”

I tipped back my head and swallowed another mouthful of the wine.

“This is so smooth, Ezzy. What kind is it?” I moved out of my chair, walked over, and picked up the bottle.

“You ignored my question, so I guess I know the answer,” she said, sliding in her chair to face me. “I’m sorry, Alex. You really deserved to have a night where you could relax and enjoy a couple of hours with your friends.”

“It’s a Meritage. It’s nice.” I swirled the wine in my glass, set down the bottle, and leaned my rump against the counter, trying to deluge the sickening images.

Seconds ticked by, and then the grandfather clock chimed.

“It was vicious, inhuman, Ezzy.” I slowly shifted my gaze to her.

She didn’t say a thing as she locked eyes with me.

“Nothing was stolen. No obvious motive.”

I took another sip and lost my eyes through the window as a neighbor’s spotlight reflected off the shingled roof of our garage.

“You knew this person.” Ezzy made the statement as a fact.

“Not really. Well, kind of.”

I shifted my feet, not wanting to dissect the strange feeling of wanting to speak to Monty, hoping that he cared just a little bit.

“We met. Once. He owns this bar, or co-owns it with his dad, I guess. I thought we might run into each other tonight. Then all hell broke loose. His dad found him and had a frickin’ heart attack.”

“Oh, oh my.”

I released a breath, and it fluttered just a tad. Had the thoughts of seeing Monty gutted like a pig begun to pull me back into the empty despair I’d felt

from Mark's death? I couldn't be that fragile. That was all behind me, at least the part of me that had let weakness set up shop in my psyche.

"Are you sure working in this Violent Crimes Squad is what you're meant to do, Alex? Think about what you've been through, dear girl. It's okay to choose a different calling in life, you know."

I pressed my lips against my teeth and swallowed back a hint of emotion, realizing I had no reason to connect Mark's death with the murder from earlier tonight. I was actually pissed for allowing my mind to even think about feeling sorry for myself. It just wasn't me.

"I don't want to sound conceited, Ezzy, but I was drawn back to the Violent Crimes Squad because I know how much I can help. It's not always easy, but it's where I can contribute the most to this world. I need to make a difference."

She let out a chuckle just as my two kids barreled into the kitchen and nearly ran me over.

"You guys...what are you doing up so late?"

"Couldn't sleep," Erin said, draping a lanky arm over my shoulder.

I worried if my fourteen-year-old had fallen prey to the wicked ways of the mean girls again.

"Everything okay, hun?"

"Yeah, just worried about my algebra test tomorrow. I want to nail it."

I gave her a wink. "You'll do just fine." I jostled the bushy head of my eleven-year-old son. "And what's your excuse, mister?"

"Scary monsters?" Luke's sheepish grin turned into a full-fledged smile. "Actually, I smelled the *pupusas* and I got hungry. Can I have a late-night snack?"

"On a school night at almost midnight?"

"Yeah, Mom, please," they both said in tandem.

Ten minutes later, Ezzy served Erin and Luke piping hot *pupusas*, and the four of us chatted as if it was the middle of the day. I sipped more wine, laughed a little, and tried to let the memories of Monty's cold stare dissolve into nothingness.

When my head finally hit the pillow, the images returned with a vengeance, and sleep was as elusive as a warm March day in Boston.

A trail of searing heat sloped down my chest, and my head thumped against the chilled window. I was hoping the contrasting conditions would do the trick on my pounding headache.

"Did you see the sign?" Nick sounded anxious behind the wheel of his FBI-issued Impala.

"Sorry, my eyes are closed."

"What the hell, Alex?"

"Hey, I only got ninety minutes of sleep last night." I tried pulling myself upright as I balanced my coffee.

"I forgot," he said, flipping the blinker to pass a slower vehicle. "You and the kids stayed up late telling ghost stories."

"Ezzy too. And they weren't ghost stories. Well, Erin did share one with me right at bedtime."

"I guess we know the culprit. It's all Freddie Krueger's fault."

I turned my head just so Nick could see my eyes roll, but one actually stayed closed, and I had to pry it open.

"I'm a hot mess." I held up the coffee cup, wondering why I'd yet to feel the mental jolt. "Did you somehow get me decaf?"

He raised a quick eyebrow while keeping his gaze on the rain-soaked road. "I'm the one who has to be in the car with you. Do you think I'd sabotage myself like that? I don't think so."

Another downpour pelted the car, and my jaw opened a tad as my mind fell into a rhythmic slumber.

"Did you see *that* sign?" he asked.

I wiped drool off my lips and came to attention. "Uh...yeah."

"How far to Lowell? My phone signal isn't working worth a shit."

"I think it said four miles." I pinched the corners of my eyes until my mental engine came to life.

Out of nowhere, an enormous wave of water engulfed the Impala. Vision was cut to nothing in an instant.

I grabbed the dash with one hand as Nick yelled, "Shiiiiit," his arms as stiff as steel as he tried to maneuver the car.

We started hydroplaning, and we both screamed expletives. Just as quickly, the tires gripped the pavement, the wave disappeared, and the Impala continued moving northwest, although the car was inches away from dropping into a ditch.

"A little left, Nick."

"I got it, dammit."

I looked over at him and beads of sweat were bubbling at his receding hairline.

“Fucking eighteen-wheelers don’t belong on a two-lane road like this,” he said.

Setting my coffee in the cup holder, I opened the center console and pulled out two pieces of gum.

“How did you know?” he asked, popping in the spearmint gum pieces like they were anti-anxiety pills.

“How could I not? You chew gum like a kid sucks on his pacifier.”

“Thanks.”

With my brain running on eight cylinders, even if it was by shock treatment, I became my regular inquisitive self.

“I have to admit not being the most alert when you picked me up this morning, so I need you to reiterate why we’re being pulled into this local murder in Lowell.”

“I never told you because you looked like a zombie.”

“Felt like one too. Hit me.”

He chomped his gum about forty times in five seconds, then said, “There was a murder in a quiet neighborhood and—”

“In Lowell?”

“Right. As I was saying, the home belongs to a lieutenant with the state police.”

We locked eyes for a quick second, and then Nick continued. “The vic was Lieutenant Ben Murphy. Barking dogs woke up neighbors, who eventually found an open door and a dead body.”

“He lived alone?”

“He’s married and has at least one kid.”

“How bad is it?”

“Bad enough to call in the FBI, according to Jerry’s phone call this morning. Apparently, the local police in Lowell mentioned a possible connection to another murder outside of their jurisdiction.”

“So we get to play referee?” I asked.

“Maybe. Jerry said not to commit to anything until we have a chance to talk to him. Said he doesn’t want to throw resources at something that can be handled by the locals.”

“Makes sense.”

Nick veered the Impala down an exit ramp into South Lowell, and I noticed a sign through the window dotted by raindrops.

“Welcome to Lowell, home of the Spinners.”

“I didn’t know that old group retired here. I thought they would have settled down in Detroit. You know Motown.” Nick released a few laughs as he turned his shoulder before cutting across two lanes and turning north on Lawrence Street.

“Funny. It’s a baseball team, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

My eyes stuck on open green space next to a forest of trees. “I think I

recall coming up here to go to a baseball game.”

I sat forward in my seat, shaking a hand to pull more information from my memory. “I think it was just Mark, Luke, and me. Erin wasn’t with us for whatever reason. Some type of minor league baseball tour. The Spinners are a Class A team. Lower Class A, in fact.”

With the rain now nothing more than a light drizzle, Nick rested a single wrist on top of the steering wheel, his shoulders more relaxed. “You think I can verify that for you? I’m not really into baseball. In our house, we live and breathe Patriots football.”

The wipers squealed against the windshield, and with that noise came the flash of another memory. I brought a hand to my face.

“Are you smiling or gasping?”

“What?” I said, slowly shifting my eyes from the windshield to Nick.

“You’re thinking about something. Something from your past, I take it?” Nick said.

“It’s hard to believe it actually happened.”

I paused and let my eyes cast a gaze on a wooded cemetery off to the right, then we crossed a bridge. “The Concord River,” I said, reading the sign.

“Shit, Alex, do I have to beg you to tell me?”

“Oh, my mind is trying to determine if my memory is playing tricks on me. But I now recall Luke saying his first cuss word.”

Nick chuckled. “You gotta share it now.”

“Well, we were at this Spinners game. I can still recall the brick tower just beyond left field, and their team logo—a red rope circling a baseball bat.”

“Who says you’ve lost your mind?”

“Memory, not my mind, asshole.”

“I know, just ribbin’ you a bit. Continue with the story. It helps the drive go faster.”

I slurped a quick dose of coffee and wiped my mouth. “Anyway, we were sitting up in the stands a bit on the first-base side. One of the Lowell players hit a foul ball to our side, but it could have hit a low-flying plane. I lost it in the lights. It just hung up there forever.”

Nick tapped the steering wheel with a ring twice. “You’re killing me with the suspense. Unless that’s the extent of this story. Tell me there’s more.”

“Much. So the ball drops down, and I reach for my beer. All of sudden, Luke jumps out of his chair just as I hear the most god-awful crack.”

I glanced over at Nick. “What crack?”

I held up a single finger. “I jerked my head over to where the ball had landed, and I saw a bald-headed man crumbling to the ground just as Luke yelled out, ‘*Holy shit!*’ at the top of his lungs.”

Nick winced and snorted at the same time. “Crap,” he said in single gasp.

The Impala slowed to a pedestrian thirty miles per hour as we turned onto a side road. I could see a much larger river in front of us as Nick hooked

a right onto a street with older homes and overgrown trees. It was easy to pick out the victim's home. I noticed at least a dozen marked cars, even a couple with lights flashing. As we approached the crime scene, an officer lifted out of his black-and-white cruiser wearing a thick jacket and a plastic cover over his hat.

"FBI," Nick said, holding his badge to where the uniformed officer could see him.

"Join the party." The officer looked barely old enough to shave.

"Party?"

"Yeah, our guys are here in full force—uniforms like me, detectives, crime scene guys. We also got the Mass. State Police on site saying they're taking over the investigation, and then ATF just showed up."

"What?" I said from across the seat.

"Yeah, crazy shit. Detectives found a bomb."

Nick and I both dropped our jaws at the same moment.

The officer waved his hand. "It's not live. It was being constructed."

"So do they think the perp left it?"

"I don't know a damn thing. As usual, they treat us uniforms like we're working for the bad guys. I'm sure they'll open up to you guys once you flash that fancy badge. Hey, how can I get one of those?"

"If you have to ask, it's too early in your career. Do your research and then ask," I said. Nick punched the window upward, and we rolled ahead, stopping about four houses down from the yellow tape.

A guy in a suit emerged from the house, staring us down as he walked toward us on the sidewalk.

"I'm not really in the mood to play detective traffic cop between all these agencies. How do you want to play this?" Nick asked.

"We drove all the way up here to gather facts. Someone can tell us all the facts, or we can leave."

"I like that approach."

"FBI special agents?" An Asian man with jet-black hair, slicked back, extended his hand. We verbally exchanged credentials. Apparently, Charlie Tan was the lead detective in Lowell.

"What can you share with us?" I asked as we walked into the living room.

"Seems pretty cut and dry if you ask me," Charlie said, flipping his head for us to follow him.

The place was filled with people and spotlights. A hub of activity was centered near the entrance to the hallway.

"FBI just arrived on the scene, ladies and gents. Clear the space for a moment, and let them get a look-see."

A man rose from a crouched position and flipped around to face us. He wore cowboy boots and stood as tall as a tree. "I'm not doing dick for the FBI," he said, crossing his arms.

“ATF?” Nick said.

“How’d you know?” Lerch wasn’t from around here; that much was obvious.

“Because you got a shitty attitude. Now, give us some space so we can do our jobs.”

“Says who?”

A nice little turf war, just what we were hoping to avoid. I stepped in front of Nick. “Are you really going to act like you’re in eighth grade?”

He thumbed behind his shoulder and said, “Listen, lady, I got a bomb in —”

“My name is Special Agent Troutt. Memorize it.”

He snickered.

I continued, unfazed. “And unless the bomb is about to detonate, then you can give us a few minutes to review the crime scene here with Detective Tan. We’ll want to talk to you in a few minutes.” I stepped into the hallway and bumped the ATF agent’s leg.

“Whatever. I’m taking five,” he said behind me as my eyes caught sight of the feet of the victim. The rest of his body was around the corner in another room.

I then gave our tour guide the cue. “Detective Tan...”

Charlie Tan cleared his throat and stepped closer to Nick and me. “Given what we’ve seen thus far, here’s what I think happened.”

I nodded, taking in the drops of blood on the beige carpet, leading down the hallway toward the body.

“Perp enters the back door,” he said, pointing a blue-gloved hand around the corner. “Forced his way in, by the way. The frame was ripped off.”

“Sounds more like a home invasion,” I said, catching a glimpse of Nick, who was standing on the toes of his shoes to look beyond a horde of people toward the back of the house.

“Well, whatever it was, he was obviously pissed off. Came inside, found Murphy, and did a...number on him.” Charlie’s voice lingered an extra second.

“A number?”

His eyes drifted to the white wall. “It’s the sickest thing I’ve ever seen.” He started toward the room where the body was, but I held up a hand.

“Don’t want to be distracted by the body just yet.”

“Okay, yeah. Makes sense.”

“You have a theory, I’m guessing?”

“Right. It’s pretty obvious the perp knew the vic. I think the vic was running into the bedroom. We found a .38 in his bedside table.”

“That’s the extent of your theory?”

“Actually, given the vic’s position with the state police, I’m guessing the perp has a record, maybe he’s someone Murphy put away. Perhaps the perp just got out of the joint, then made it his mission to find him.”

I nodded and popped the detective on the shoulder. “I like how your mind thinks, Detective.”

Knowing we couldn’t punch a hole in every theory right off the bat—I needed a motivated investigating team—I started with the basics.

“Let’s take a look at the body while you explain how you think this murder is connected to some other murder in the area.”

Charlie led the way. “Watch your step. We’ve kept the body in the same condition we found it when we got here.”

The moment I turned the corner into the bedroom I knew why.

Blood and body organs were spread all over his chest. The carpet was a matted crimson. I heard Nick lurch a bit, but I was able to keep my coffee down.

“Looks like someone did some excavating,” I said, immediately thinking about the night before at Monty’s. I didn’t want to go there.

“Fuckin’ psycho,” Nick announced, moving up next to me.

“I haven’t seen this much blood if you combined our last ten homicides,” Charlie said.

The gash was maybe five inches wide, center of the neck.

“You could stick your fist in there,” I said, more to myself.

“Maybe two,” Nick added.

Kneeling down, I paid closer attention to the remnants on the vic’s torso. “What is this crap anyway?”

“Our ME says it’s just about everything you can pull from the throat. Larynx, Esophagus, trachea. Other blood vessels.”

“So he *did* put his fist down the vic’s throat,” I said, standing back up.

“Like I said, ‘fuckin psycho.’” Nick flexed his hands.

“Who *isn’t* that we deal with in this squad?” I arched an eyebrow and moved closer to the bedside table.

“Is the gun still inside?” I gestured toward the drawer.

“No, we took pics, logged and bagged it,” Charlie said.

“Was the drawer shut when you came in?”

“Yep.”

“Okay. At least part of your theory sounds plausible.” I gave him a tight-lipped smile, and he rocked forward on his shoes, obviously emboldened by the compliment.

Nick moved closer and kept his voice down. “Last night at the bar. Isn’t this homicide a little strange? Somewhat similar?” He raised both eyebrows.

I only responded with a blank stare. With the visuals of Monty’s murder fresh on my mind, I kept the possible comparisons to myself, at least temporarily. For whatever reason, I couldn’t get my mind to connect the murder of a nice bar owner with that of a law enforcement official. Charlie’s theory just made too much sense in how it went down. The guy who came through this house was ruthless and highly agitated.

Charlie cleared his throat and said, “By the way, my team has liaised

briefly with the Boston PD. We heard there was a murder last night where the victim had his heart pulled out of his chest.”

I eyed Nick, then Charlie. “Word travels fast. It was bad. Even worse than this gory scene,” I said.

“You think it could be the same perp?” he asked.

“I need a full rundown of this crime scene before I can offer an opinion. Let me take a look at the back door,” I said, walking out of the room.

“Or what’s left of it,” Charlie said as I passed him.

On our way to the back of the house, I could see a path of destruction. Crap was tossed everywhere—lamps, books, trophies, pictures. When we reached the kitchen, a person wearing a jacket with CSI on the back said, “Please watch your step. Lots of people milling about, and we’re still searching the premises for every fragment for evidence.”

“Got it,” Charlie said.

Broken glass and wood splinters littered the linoleum floor. Ninety percent of the door appeared to have been put through a wood chipper.

“Shotgun blast,” I said. “Sawed-off shotgun, I’m guessing.”

The CSI guy raised his head. “Really?”

“Look for black powder residue. Those type of guns act like cannons and spray crap all over. You would have found the evidence eventually.”

“Thanks,” he said, then directed two others, who scrambled a bit faster.

Nick stepped forward. “So we’re looking for a guy who’s carrying a sawed-off shotgun and some type of knife or scalpel.”

“Maybe there was more than one perp?” I suggested.

Charlie said, “Look, I’ve already got my team back at the office working with state police, searching through their database to find anyone who Murphy put behind bars at any time during his career.”

“Good. Please have them coordinate their efforts through the FBI office and contact Brad Iverson, my lead intelligence analyst.” I pulled Brad’s business card and handed it to the detective.

“Will do.” Charlie pulled out his phone, took a picture of the card, and tapped his screen a few times. Then he called someone while turning his back to us.

I could feel Nick’s glare. “What’re you doing, Alex? Jerry said to contact him before we officially stick our noses in and assume lead agency.”

“It’s going to happen anyway. Might as well try to stay on top of the investigation from the beginning, as opposed to waiting until they fuck it up,” I said into his ear.

I heard a chuckle behind me. “So you think you’re taking the lead?” Lerch blocked the overhead light he was so tall, his arms crossed again.

“Glad you showed up...”

“Agent Small.” He scratched his chin.

I did a double take, then looked at Nick. “Someone playing a joke on us?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm Special Agent Troutt; this is Special Agent Radowski."

"I would say the pleasure is all mine, but—"

"This isn't a pleasure visit," I reminded him. "But we're willing to act civil, professional even. Tell us what you know about this bomb."

Detective Tan had just strolled up and pocketed his phone.

Lerch wiped his face, and I noticed his jaw muscles flexing. He forced out a breath.

"Okay, the bomb device was found in the spare bedroom."

"Can we see it?"

"We've already taken the pieces into evidence, and they're on the way to our evidence lab."

I nodded. "Where did you find it?"

"Actually, it was inside a sewing machine."

I could feel the hair stand up on the back of my neck. "The wife. Where is she?"

"We're already looking for her. It appears the drawers to her dresser are mostly empty."

"Do we need to get a warrant for her arrest?" I asked.

"You think we need to put out an APB?" Charlie asked.

"That would be quicker than us calling the assistant US Attorney and getting a warrant, yes."

Charlie flipped around and got on his phone again.

"Where are the FBI agents?" I heard someone ask. Barreling into the front door of the house and making his way back to us was the fresh-faced officer we'd met out front.

I held up my hand. "Right back here. What's going on? Any sign of the wife?"

Just then I noticed a thin woman with pasty-white skin, her arms covering her chest, walking behind the officer.

"This neighbor here says she knows why the wife and daughter weren't home."

Charlie turned and barked before I could respond. "What do you think you're doing, bringing her in here? Move the conversation outside." He herded both of them out to the front porch. Nick and I were right behind them.

"Okay, what can you tell us?"

The officer said, "Her name is—"

"She can speak for herself."

"Uh, yeah. Go ahead," the officer said.

"Roberta Seward."

I did the FBI introductions and asked her to share what she knew about the wife and daughter.

She just shook her head. "I knew something bad would happen. Always does in this kind of situation."

“What kind of situation are you talking about?”

“Where that prick, Ben, is just sticking his dick into anything that moves.” Her lips were so thin they almost disappeared.

Glancing at Nick, I said, “How do you know this?”

“Nancy told me, that’s how.”

“Nancy’s the wife?” I asked.

Roberta gave a quick nod. “She was tired of it. That’s why she left him.”

“How long ago?”

“Two, maybe three weeks.”

I could feel tension in my body spreading like a brush fire, but I pressed on. “Do you know how long he’s been screw—I mean, seeing other women?”

Her eyes bulged out for a second. “Nancy first told me about a year ago. I think it’s been off and on for years. But she just put up with it. You know, playing the good-soldier’s-wife routine.”

I paused for a second, and Charlie stepped in between us. “Ma’am, I’ll need you to work with one of my detectives to take down your full statement.”

Another detective walked up and took Roberta to the side of the porch.

I stepped in that direction and held up a hand. “One more thing, Roberta. Did Nancy ever talk about retribution?”

One of the corners of her mouth edged upward. “Well...”

“Yes?”

“I think any woman in her position would be pissed, make a few threats. That’s all they were. Just blowing off steam.”

“Any mention of blowing up something else?”

She snickered. “She joked about blowing up the entire house, with Ben sitting in his man-cave chair with his beer between his legs.”

I moved back inside with Nick. Charlie was right behind him, even though he wasn’t invited into our conversation.

“You thinking she might have hired someone to kill him since she never completed the bomb?” Nick asked.

“It’s possible. We need to hold her under suspicion of murder for hire, as it is.”

“We can take care of that,” Charlie offered.

“Thanks.” I took Nick by the shoulder.

“We need to put in a call to the US Marshals office.”

He shook his head. “I know we’re both concerned about a possible connection between Monty’s murder and this homicide, if only because of the way they were cut open.”

I nodded as I scrolled through my phone.

“But I’m not following you. Why get another agency involved, especially the US Marshals?”

“Because they’re holding J. L. Cobb, the man who killed all the other cheating husbands. I need to know he’s still behind bars.”

Nick made the call as my stomach formed a knot the size of Lerch's head.

The clap of her heels, some type of Jimmy Choo knockoffs, echoed off the concrete sidewalk. She walked under the marquee of the Millennium Theatre, which actually sat atop the gold Ocean sign—a connection to the venue’s confusing history when it opened in 1934 as the Ocean Theatre.

Without breaking stride in her tight-fitting, sequined dress, she spotted the exact location where she and Mikey Pavlovich had shared their first kiss. And then some. It had been a good twenty years since she and the hunky high school senior had mugged down while leaning against the glass display, second from the left. They ended up missing the first half of the Ray Charles concert, lost in each other. She’d thought that feeling would never end. Never.

The Atlantic breeze whipped her bare legs, not an ounce of fat on them, yet she could feel a rise in her body temperature, and her breathing became labored. The little prick, Mikey, as it turned out, was hedging his bets, sweet-talking her one night, while romancing what he would call “a more mature girl” on other nights. Nights when she thought he was working at his father’s liquor store to earn money so he could take her on a big-time date, maybe to a high-dollar Broadway show.

Fuck him. And fuck her.

She heard the hissing of air as she inhaled and exhaled between clenched teeth, as if she were cracking a bone in two.

Not a bad thought. Maybe she’d actually take that next step in her evolution. Later, though.

She tossed her lime green and deep burgundy scarf over her shoulder, her eyes still peeled to the window display where she’d thought foolishly that all her happy dreams would come true.

A car horn blared, which caused her heart to jump. Turning to the road, three guys leaned out of the hopped-up, chocolate-brown Monte Carlo, whistling and yelling a bunch of Russian catcalls. Her instinct said to pull her .38 from her black clutch and fire off three quick rounds to their chests, puncturing their hearts. But she found herself slowing her pace, surprisingly smitten by their lurid comments. Her lips turned upward at the corners, and she flipped her fingers through the edge of her cropped, gelled hair.

“Get out of the way, you old bag,” some gangbanger said, wearing his flat-bill Yankees cap off to the side.

She froze, then her eyes looked down.

“Old bitch, we want to see that fine piece of poon. Get the fuck out of the way.”

Glancing to her right, she noticed a girl about half her age sauntering with purpose, her tight ass popping with each step. She had flawless skin, but it was her substantial cleavage that had undoubtedly drawn the seemingly

animalistic hoots from the frothing animals.

She put her hand on her clutch, feeling the outline of the pistol, momentarily picturing how this scene could play out. She was no virgin in the art of war. Carrying out this act wouldn't even enter her top one hundred of most memorable events in her life.

But most of those had been carried out in a place that few could fathom, let alone survive.

Another blare of the horn. Shaking her head at the Brighton Beach maggots, she realized not much had changed since her teenage years.

She shifted her eyes forward and within seconds heard her heels motoring down the sidewalk, her pulse moving just as quickly. She knew she couldn't get bogged down in trivial matters. They would only derail her mission. And her mission was all she had. All that mattered in her life.

Moving past Brighton 7th Street, she cut between two older model Corvettes and crossed the street, turning south down Brighton 6th Street. She hopped onto the crowded sidewalk and nearly ran into four guys in velour sweats and chunky gold chains.

One of them made some type of wet sound with his mouth, and in perfect stride, she jabbed her heel into the toe of his Adidas shoe.

"Ah, fuck," he said, hopping on one leg.

She just kept walking, her destination not far ahead. A half-block away, she could see the lights from Tatiana, and her stomach fluttered with butterflies. She felt like she was preparing to take the stage for her own opening night on Broadway. Everything else before this night was nothing more than a dress rehearsal.

Nailing it on opening night typically led to rave reviews and splashy headlines promising patrons a can't-miss evening of entertainment. She knew what she had planned was nothing short of a breakout performance that would elicit cries from every corner in this pathetic section of Brooklyn.

Two guys in suits anchored each side of the front door. She forced herself to show a toothy smile, and they traded stares then glared straight ahead. Upon entering, she noticed a colorful cabaret show playing at the far end, the raucous music bringing people to their feet, clapping and hollering in their native Russian.

She asked to be seated in the quieter section, along a wall, her eyes able to take in the entire space. The restaurant and nightclub was nothing if not gaudy—just like the rest of Brighton Beach. Gold and red decor played with the blinding purples and pinks of not only the singers and dancers on stage, but also the patrons.

She'd stopped at Julia's Boutique to pick up the tight number she'd squeezed her rectangular figure into, but from seeing how the other women were dressed, it was obvious she hadn't found the truly slutty selection.

"A drink, miss?"

A napkin was tossed on her table, and the woman looked into the

waitress's eyes.

It was her, and a rush of adrenaline flooded her veins. She dug her fingers into her leg under the table.

"I'll have a Grey Goose, neat. Thank you."

The waitress still had that look from more than two decades earlier. A nice figure, even her skin seemed vibrant. She took down the woman's order, and that was when she noticed the server's nails. They didn't match the rest of her vibe. They appeared to be chewed. The woman looked at her eyes again, set deep in her head, with dark circles beneath.

Was she a druggie?

The woman could feel her body break out in goosebumps, elated to see that the perfect life for Miss Perfect had been anything but.

And it was about to get a great deal worse.

"Do you know what you'd like to order yet?"

"I just got here, so I need a few minutes to take this all in. This is one of the legendary establishments in Brooklyn, is it not?"

The waitress, better known as Karina, rolled her eyes, resting her hand on the top of the chair in front of her. "Yes, that's what they say." She sighed heavily. "Sorry for seeming out of it. I'm just very tired. This is my second double shift in two days. I need a break."

The woman nodded and set her clutch on the table, then patted it. "Perhaps I have something that can, uh, take the edge off for you."

Karina's recessed eyes came to life.

"After I have a chance to enjoy my drink, eat some of this great food, perhaps we can take a stroll along the Boardwalk." A wry smile cracked her face.

"Certainly. I'll do anything for, uh...you know. I'll get your drink right away."

As Karina sped off, the woman tried to not get ahead of herself. Her eyes shifted to a table off to the right. Some cheeseball with curly, shoulder-length hair and a mustache the size of a rat wearing a white suit had his arm around a woman with a gold chain that had fallen between her boobs. But it was *her* dark mustache that caught the woman's eye.

"Some women just have no clue on how to groom themselves," she said, her voice lost in the sounds of the horns and piano.

A man walked by in a four-button gray suit. His thick mound of hair ate up most of his forehead, nearly affixed to his out-of-control eyebrows.

He was met by two other guys, one wearing a purple sweater and what appeared to be a permanent scowl, the other in a brown leather jacket and tan scarf. They shook hands, exchanged a few words, and walked toward a larger table of people who matched their appearance.

Amazing how so much had changed over the years, but in Brighton Beach, everything had stayed frozen in time.

"Here you go." Sounding a bit out of breath, Karina had arrived with the

drink. She blew a lock of dirty-blond hair out of her face and just stood there, watching the woman twist the stem of the glass.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked, knowing it was condescending.

“Oh, nothing. Just making sure you have everything you need. Can I get your food now?”

The server’s previous distinct English enunciation had faded behind her Russian roots. Perhaps her desperation had gotten the best of her.

“Whatever you want. It will be on the house,” she added.

“Oh, let’s see. I guess I’ll try your crawfish.”

“Raki. One of our best. I’ll make sure the chef cooks it to perfection.”

Karina ran off again. The food arrived in quick order, and the woman thought it quite tasty. Karina continued to serve the woman for the next hour as if she were the only person in the restaurant. The woman admitted that yanking her chain was an unexpected benefit of this mission. But the time had come to take everything to the next level. The last place she wanted to kill time was in Brighton Beach.

Kill time.

She brought her hand to her mouth and giggled at her own pun.

She insisted on paying the bill in full. Karina arrived just as she inserted the cash and closed the leather case.

“I’m off to my next escapade,” the woman said, scooting out of her booth and standing up to face her waitress.

“But I thought...” Her eyes became watery, as if the woman had just said that her dog had died.

“Meet me on the Boardwalk,” the woman said, tapping her clutch, “and I’ll take you to a place you never dreamed of.”

Five minutes passed and the woman’s shoes banged off wooden planks. She took in a dose of the salty air, as the dark skies off the coast flashed lightning.

“Do you have the shit?”

Karina had jogged up next to the woman, her breath heaving a bit.

“What shit in particular?”

“What? Are you playing games with me?” Her voice had a hint of anger in it.

The woman held up a finger and shifted her eyes so that Karina could see her response. “I don’t play games, Karina Leshev.”

The desperate waitress didn’t appear to notice the mentioning of her name. Maybe she was so lost in her desire for her next fix, she didn’t care.

“Look, I need a Molly. Please tell me you have one.” She glanced over her shoulder and wrung her hands.

“Find us a nice quiet place, and we can share a special moment.”

Karina’s dark eyes locked on the woman’s. She then grabbed her hand and said, “Come with me.”

They walked briskly, moving off the wooden planks and down the street

until they found an alley. Karina pulled up at a door and knocked twice.

The woman had not anticipated another person being involved.

“No one’s here. We can be private in here,” Karina said, leading them into a room that held racks of meat.

Karina found a butcher’s table and climbed on top, her legs dangling off. “It is dangerous if this is taken while standing up. I have learned the hard way.” She pulled back her hair and showed a nasty bruise protruding from her hairline. She then held out her hand.

“You do know, Karina, that Mollies can kill you?”

“I only know it gives me the greatest high of my life. It’s an escape from all that my life has become.”

Her tone had turned somber, her eyes flat, void of emotion.

“What has been so bad about your life, Karina? Tell me,” the woman said, thumping her own chest.

“I...I cannot think about it. It’s too depressing,” she said, wiping her face.

“If you want your Molly, you will tell me.” The woman wanted to hear her pathetic excuse for ruining her own life after she’d ruined the woman’s so many years ago.

“I have babies with three different men. All of them are very bad people. But I was young and stupid, and I could only believe their fake promises.”

Karina released a whimper.

“I do not have any of my babies anymore. They were taken away from me.” She pounded her fist to the table, but the woman didn’t flinch.

“Why, Karina? Why were your babies taken from you?”

“Because I’m an—”

“An addict. You’re a loser, Karina. Nothing but a cheap whore who couldn’t keep her legs closed. Right, Karina Leshev?”

The thin waitress dropped her head in her hands, screaming for five seconds straight. Then she jerked her head back up. “How do you know my full name?” Her eyebrows pulled together to form a single line of confusion.

“Nothing but a whore.”

Her addiction barreled over any hesitancy. “Give me my Molly, dammit.”

“You’ve been that way your whole life, haven’t you?”

Karina stabbed her finger into the metal table and barked, “Men are put on this earth as the so-called stronger sex, and all they do is screw us over. So when I’ve had the opportunity to get things I want, I don’t apologize. I take them.”

“Yes. Yes you do.”

The woman hiked up her dress, and she could see Karina lower her eyes.

“If you want to do some kinky shit, I’ll do it. Anything to get my Molly.”

The woman pulled the knife from the sheath attached to her upper thigh, and she rotated the grip in her fingers.

Karina pulled in a gasping breath at the exact moment a spear of light bounced off the serrated blade.

“Take your eyes off the knife and look at me, Karina Leshev. Do you recognize me?”

“I...I...” She couldn’t help but shift her stare back to the blade as her chest expanded in quick order. “How do you know my name?”

“Because we went to school together.” The woman narrowed her eyes, a wicked smile forming on her lips.

Karina twisted her head, her mouth ajar. “How...is it really you?”

“Good to see your brain isn’t complete mush.”

“We should be a united front. Women against the real enemy in this world. All the men are fascist pigs.”

“No need to go political on me, Karina.” She continued toying with the knife as her pulse blew past a hundred. She knew she couldn’t contain her elation much longer. “Tell me one thing, Karina.”

The thin woman started to sniffle. “What do you want to know?” she asked with defiance entering her voice, her eyes still fixated on the blade.

“Was it worth it?”

She opened her mouth one last time. Then the woman sliced her until she didn’t say another word.

Five minutes later, the woman stepped into the alley and glanced at her hands and arms to ensure all the blood had been wiped clean. Nothing visible.

“And now for the encore,” she said, turning the corner, moving east on Bridgewater.

She arrived at Pavlovich’s Liquor, encouraged to see the parking lot empty. It was near closing time. A bell dinged when she entered, and a man’s voice from behind the counter said, “We close in five minutes.”

It was Mikey.

Flipping around, she took another look outside. All clear. She twisted the lock on the door ever so carefully. As she moved through the store, she saw him staring at her through the mirror positioned in the corner.

She picked up a bottle of vodka and eyed the label.

“We’re known for carrying the best honey pepper vodka in the United States. We’re connected to a special distillery in Kiev. But if there’s any other way I can assist you, please let me know.”

The woman nodded. Obviously, he’d seen something that he liked. She carried the bottle over to the counter and set it down.

“Okay, that will be one hundred forty-five dollars and twenty-seven cents.”

She opened her purse and pretended to be exasperated.

“What?” he asked.

“I don’t have enough. I had to pay for the taxi ride to dinner. On top of

that, my date made me pay for dinner, and then he took off.” She huffed out a breath.

“Oh, well, I guess you can come back another day.” He lowered his eyes.

“Or maybe I can pay you back in a way you’ll never forget.”

He jumped back a step when he saw she’d already found her way around the junk-filled counter. She kept walking until her entire body pressed against his. “I can tell that you want me.”

“Well, uh...”

She noticed a ring on his finger as she slunk down to her knees.

“Mikeyyyy,” she said as he pushed his glasses higher on his nose while looking down at her.

She tapped the end of the blade in her opposite hand.

“What the fuck you doing with a blade, bitch?” he shrieked, slamming his body back until it rammed the counter. Dozens of packs of cigarettes and condom packages fell on top of him and down to the floor.

She picked up a condom package and lifted to a standing position.

“Safety comes first.” She smiled as his eyes moved from the blade to her face.

“You’re one of those bitches into S&M, aren’t you?”

“Mikey, I’m ashamed you’d think so poorly of me.”

“Hey, how do you know my name?” He pointed a finger at her nose.

“You’re actually going to be rude to me when I’m the one holding the knife? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised at your stupidity. After all these years, you’re still working at daddy’s store.”

He set his feet and leaned forward, again pushing his glasses up.

“That’s right, Mikey. It’s me.”

His Adam’s apple protruded for a second as he looked back down at the blade.

She flipped the knife to a power grip and raised it to her shoulder. “Say good night, Mikey.”

He didn’t have time to respond. It took her about six minutes to complete the task in the manner she’d envisioned.

The doorbell jingled as she closed it behind her, and she said out loud, “The encore is always better than the regular show.”

Rolling layers of gray clouds hovered just above the lights that outlined the US Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Leaning forward in my midget rental car, I spotted the two guards in the front tower, one holding a phone to his ear, the other holding a rifle.

Life at a high-security prison. The current home of J. L. Cobb, also known as the Ring Killer. My husband's killer.

The passenger door opened, and Nick slipped back in, rubbing his hands together.

"Guard said he has no record of our scheduled visit."

"What the—"

"Hold on. He knows we're FBI. I gave him Jerry's number, and he said it's just a matter of the warden reaching out to Jerry. And—"

I grabbed his forearm. "We don't have time to deal with red tape. We're talking about the investigation of two different murders."

"Alex, hey." Nick unpeeled my grip, placing his hand on top of mine. "I knew this would be tough on you. It's not too late to back out. You can go hang out at a local diner, and I'll interview Cobb."

Tough didn't begin to describe the jarring swing of emotions. Nick didn't know it—and I wasn't about to share the information—but I'd already tossed up my breakfast in the Williamsport Airport just after we landed an hour earlier.

I was the one who'd made the decision that we should interview Cobb one more time. I was the one who'd convinced Jerry to get the necessary approvals up his food chain to allow me to interview my husband's killer. Why? Not because I was trying to collect evidence on the ring killer murders. Cobb's murder case was now owned by the US Attorney's Office, and trial had been set for six months down the line.

But I also knew my argument for interviewing Cobb hadn't been completely transparent. To find out if he had any knowledge of someone who might want to pick up the killings where he left off, it meant reopening the discussion on his killings. Mark's included.

"Alex?" Nick lowered his head.

"Sorry. Just thinking if I gave Ezzy all the instructions about the kids' after-school events today. Erin has some type of cheerleading competition, while Luke is working on a project at a friend's house, then he's going to basketball practice. Lots to keep up with."

"I get it. You have a lot swirling around in that mind of yours," he said, patting my hand then releasing it. "You don't want to miss this opportunity."

Before I could retort, I heard a knock on my window. We were ushered through the gate and asked to check in our weapons. On our way to the

interview room, we were taken to see the warden, who offered us some insight into Cobb's well-being.

"He's not right." A man whose earlobes nearly touched his shoulder plopped down his pen and sat in his high-back chair.

"What exactly are you referring to?" I asked.

"He's just not there. In a daze, out to lunch, however you want to put it. At other times, he's more than any one guard can handle."

I inched forward in my seat to where my hand could touch his desk. "You are aware that the prisoner has Asperger's syndrome, and with that, a person can be rather volatile."

It felt odd to be defending the man who'd murdered Mark. What the hell was I doing? Why did I give a shit?

"Special Agent Troutt, I assure you that our staff, including our on-site psychiatrist, has dealt with every personality type in the spectrum. As a courtesy to you and your investigation, I thought I'd give you a warning."

I nodded, lifted from my chair, and walked to the door with Nick on my heels.

"One more thing, Troutt. I understand your husband was one of Cobb's victims."

I glanced at Nick, and I could feel my neck on fire. I decided not to perpetuate the secrecy. "Yes, he murdered my husband, but our investigation concerns another murder. Just need to pick his brain."

"Very well," he said, leaning an elbow on his desk while writing a few notes in a portfolio.

I turned to leave, then flipped back around, nearly running into our escort. "By the way, how did you know? Did my boss tell you?"

"What? No. Cobb told me. When he's not going through one of his episodes, he's bragging to everyone who will listen about who he killed, especially your husband."

I pressed a stubby nail into the palm of my hand. "Thanks for the insight, Warden."

I pushed out a slow breath as we walked down the empty hallway, just Nick, the guard, and me. The guard would punch in a code and show his ID to a camera at each of the five stops divided by barred gates, controlled electronically by someone we could only hear through the speaker system.

"You can have a seat," our guard told us as he opened the door to a room that was completely gray—the walls, floor, desk, chairs, even the ceiling. "The prisoner will be escorted to this room and handcuffed to the bar on the wall. We will have two guards in the room at all times."

"That's not really necessary. My partner and I can take care of the prisoner and ourselves. We kind of do it for a living."

The guard took a step into the room. "No disrespect, but those are the rules. If you don't want to follow them, you can leave without interviewing the prisoner."

I gave him a monotone response. "I'm good. We're good. Let's just get on with it."

"If it makes you feel any better, we've learned the hard way on these rules. At one time, we used to allow exceptions. But I've seen a prisoner take his handcuffs and break the neck of his own lawyer. Another prisoner waited until he had a free moment with his wife, then he pulled out a blade and sliced up her tits until—"

"We get the picture," Nick said.

"Sorry. Back in just a minute with the prisoner."

I rubbed my hands together and thought about Erin and Luke. Part of me knew I had to face Cobb outside of a witness stand. If for no other reason, I had to truly see what made him tick. For the kids' sake. Maybe for mine too.

The hum of the caged ceiling lights was only interrupted by Nick shifting in his chair to check his phone.

"Anything from Jerry?" I asked, trying to remove my mind from the intensity I felt, anything to dull my sharpened senses. Frankly, it didn't matter anymore since we had made our way inside the federal prison.

"Wouldn't know. Can't get a damn signal in this place."

"Let me take a look." I grabbed the phone and studied the connection, something I'd normally blow off.

"I think we're cut off from the world inside this steel and concrete jungle."

The door's metal handle jarred, and my stomach slingshotted into the back of my throat. Keeping my eyes lowered, I pushed to a standing position and moved around to the other side of the table as one of the guards cuffed Cobb to the bar on the wall.

Outside of the shuffling of shoes and wrenching of handcuffs, I thought I detected a soft mumble. As the guard moved to the far side of the room—the other one stood by the door—I lifted my eyes slowly, first catching Cobb's orange jumpsuit.

As my eyes moved higher, I saw his cuffs looped inside the metal bar, his head resting on the top of his hand as he sat in a chair that must have weighed seventy-five pounds. I thought I heard more mumbling. Was he praying?

"Mr. Cobb, we're with the FBI, and we'd like to have a conversation with you."

His mumble grew louder, and he began shaking his head. I glanced at Nick and tried to continue. "For the record, I understand you've waived your right to have an attorney present. Is that true?"

He didn't reply, but the pace of his head-shaking only increased.

"Mr. Cobb?"

The guard in the far corner moved closer. "This is what the warden was talking about."

"I'm not crazy," Cobb blurted out, his head still down.

I took in a breath. "Are you ready to talk to us now?" I said, keeping my

tone measured.

Metal clanged the bar as he began to rub his temples. "I just need a packet of salt. Pepper would work too."

I exchanged a curious look with the guard, now just a few feet from me.

"Sorry, but that's not allowed." The guard set his feet shoulder-width apart and stuck his fingers inside his belt loop.

"Then I'm not going to talk to anyone," Cobb said, his voice cracking. He dropped his shoulder and let his wrists hang from the cuffs. Within seconds, they began to turn a shade of blue, but he didn't seem to care.

I pinched the corners of my eyes, as the tension began to drain my body of resources. I'd gotten up at four a.m. to take a puddle-jumper three hours from Boston to Williamsport, then another hour in the car winding through the Pennsylvania countryside. My stomach felt like it had been clawed by one of the bears we'd seen on the side of the road.

"Mr. Cobb, what do you want to do with the salt or pepper packet?"

The guard stuck out his jaw, but didn't utter a word.

"I...I..." He fumbled with his words.

"You see, he's just crazy," the guard said, his palms turned out. "He doesn't know what he wants or when he wants it. He's certifiable."

His last comment might be true. Anyone who'd committed the deplorable acts Cobb had couldn't completely be of sound mind. But I questioned the guard's other assessment about Cobb not knowing what he wanted.

The guard narrowed one eye. It was obvious he didn't want me to pursue Cobb's request any further. But I'd come too far—in every way possible—to not try to appease the murderer so that we could have a few minutes of real conversation.

"J. L., tell me why you need the salt or pepper packets."

I heard a snuffle, but I refused to let myself feel sorry for him.

"J. L.?"

"I...I need to count the little morsels of salt. That's all I need to do, is to count them. Well, I might try to create various mathematical equations. I can think of about six hundred twenty-nine equations to start off with."

Purposely not looking to my right, I locked eyes with the other guard. His stoic manner melted in a couple of seconds, and he stretched his lips across his face. Then he dug into his front packet and pulled out a small pouch of pepper.

"What the hell?" the other guard asked.

"It's left over from breakfast, and I...uh...well, I sometimes give my extra packets to Cobb."

"What? I ought to have you reprimanded," the guard to my right said.

"Sue me, dammit. It's just pepper."

Without debating it, I walked over to the guard with the pepper packet and took it from him. I then walked toward Cobb but was quickly intercepted

by Nick. "I'll do it."

"Okay," I said calmly, as part of me knew it would be difficult to not unleash my fury if I got close enough. Apparently, Nick knew it too.

As Cobb turned and opened his hand, he lifted his head to look at Nick. "Thank you."

I then noticed red marks on the side of his neck and face. As I shifted to my left, I spotted bruises on his face.

"What happened?"

The guards looked straight ahead as if I hadn't spoken.

Cobb had already started his counting routine, as I thought he would. His lips moved, but he didn't say anything audible. A typical behavior for someone with Asperger's.

"J. L.?"

"Cigarette burns," he said, with his eyes still flinching a bit as his lips continued moving even after he'd finished speaking. He added, "And I got beat up for being a queer. But I'm no queer. They just called me that."

He was talking, finally. I took in a full breath, rested my rear end against the table, and crossed my arms.

"J. L., I gave you what you wanted, so I need you to focus a few minutes on my questions."

"Sure," he said with his eyes only inches from his hand.

"Can you tell me if you made any friends during the time you were killing your victims?"

Both eyes blinked at the same time, then he said, "I killed your husband, Mark." His voice was even, as if he were talking about being issued a traffic ticket.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Nick shift in his seat. I took a hard swallow.

"J. L., I need for you—"

"It wasn't personal or anything. Not against you anyway. It was the opposite." His eyes glanced at me for a brief moment.

I bit my tongue until I tasted blood, but I kept my demeanor calm. "Opposite in what way?"

"You had no idea he was screwing around on you. He didn't give a shit about you, your marriage, or the kids."

"How did you know about my kids?" I said far too rapidly.

Nick brought a hand closer to me.

I mouthed, *I'm okay*.

"Don't mean to upset you. You had rings. It was pretty obvious you had kids."

He was referring to breaking into our house and stealing my wedding rings. I'd yet to figure out how or when. But I couldn't let him think he had power over me, nor did I want him even thinking about Luke, and especially not Erin.

“So, let’s go back to my original question please. Did you make any friends during the time you committed the murders?”

His counting suddenly became audible, as if he was drowning out a voice in his head.

I needed to poke him a tad. “J. L., you do have friends, don’t you?”

“I’m not a complete loser. Of course I have friends, just like every other guy.”

“Did you share your adventures with any of your friends?”

“Eh...”

I couldn’t read the meaning behind that sound.

“J. L., we’re investigating at least one other murder that may have been committed for the same reason you committed your acts. Do you think any of your friends would have a reason to continue your...work?”

My breath shortened, and I could feel my gut twist into a massive ball. I just hoped I wouldn’t hurl all over the prisoner. That would end the interview and our ability to possibly learn a piece of evidence that could stop these murders—if they were indeed connected.

“Not my friend anymore,” he said with his volume turned way down.

Nick and I exchanged glances.

“I understand you were the brains of the operation,” I said.

He smirked and said, “Of course I was. You think she could have pulled off what we did without my skills?”

We’d just learned new information about the old investigation, and I knew we couldn’t stop here.

“What did she bring to the table anyway? You were the one who actually carried out the acts. That couldn’t have been easy on you.”

He took his eyes away from the pepper, and I noticed his chest lift for an extra deep breath.

“She had no clue how to hack into that motel’s computer reservation system. That was all me.”

I looked at Nick. His eyes were so wide I thought they might never shut.

“Of course, some people used fake names. But that just made it more fun, trying to figure out who they really were. But we only took the biggest offenders off the list. At least that’s where we started.”

Right there! He’d just given us an indication that this person could be continuing this fucked-up murder spree that focused on cheating spouses. But Monty Junior wasn’t married. How would he have fit into this scheme? Maybe he didn’t.

“J. L., did she tell you that she would continue killing?”

He closed his eyes and released a breath. “It’s not for me to say.”

He couldn’t clam up now. “You’re the one facing a long prison sentence. Maybe the death penalty. If you share valuable evidence, it can only help you.”

Turning to look at the wall, he scratched his thick head of hair. Without

warning, he brought his lips together and started whistling.

The guard stepped toward me. "Do you want us to take him back now?"

I held up my hand and shook my head. The whistling continued. I started to detect a certain beat. It sounded familiar.

"Do you like that song, J. L.?"

He just kept whistling. Maybe it was another way of controlling his outbursts.

"It's a classic, isn't it? Rod Stewart really knows how to write lyrics, doesn't he?"

He released a tight-lipped smile, and his whistling ceased for a few ticks. "Maggie May. The best." His voice drifted off.

"J. L., can you share with us who helped you commit these murders?"

He looked back down at his palm and his lips began to move again.

"J. L.?"

"Leave me alone. I'm tired of talking." He glanced over his shoulder. "Can you take me back to my cell?"

I stepped closer to my husband's killer. "J. L., this can only help you. Tell me who worked with you."

He stood up and closed his fist that held the pepper, purposely avoiding eye contact with me.

"J. L.?"

The guards slowly walked over and asked him to face the wall while one unhooked the handcuffs from the rail.

I wanted to ram my shoulder into Cobb, throw him against the wall, and shake him until he told me. Nick stood up, and we traded stares as I gripped the table.

"J. L." I said it so loudly everyone glared at me.

We locked eyes for a second and then his lips began to move, I couldn't hear what he was saying, if he was saying anything at all.

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

Then the words became more distinct, and he started singing:

The morning sun when it's in your face really shows your age

But that don't worry me none; in my eyes you're everything

I laughed at all of your jokes. My love you didn't need to coax

Oh, Maggie I couldn't have tried any more

You lured me away from home, just to save you from being alone

You stole my soul and that's a pain I can do without

His last words echoed as the guard took my husband's killer into the hall.

“Do you believe him?” Brad asked while sliding a pizza box across the table in the FBI war room back at One Center Plaza in downtown Boston.

A waft of spices and pepperoni instantly caused my mouth to water.

“Is that for us?” Extreme hunger had temporarily impaired my ability to listen. After puking up my coffee before our interview with Cobb, I’d managed to down half of a stale bologna sandwich from a vending machine at the Williamsport Airport. And now that my gut wasn’t twisted into a million knots, I could see how inadequate my energy reserves had become.

“If you want it to be.” Brad’s dimples framed a full-blown smile.

Just as my hands reached for the box, he grabbed it and slid it back.

“Perhaps I didn’t negotiate like I should have.”

“What’s there to negotiate, who gets the most black olives?” I could practically taste the warm mozzarella cheese.

His eyes glanced away for a second. “I need more time on the request you gave me when you guys were driving back to the airport.”

I tapped my chin twice, then lunged across the table. He snatched the box up as both my palms smacked the table.

“I think she means business, Brad,” Nick offered from the far side of the table. “If you don’t feed the beast, the beast will eat you.”

All movement ceased for about two seconds, each of us wondering if the person would go there. I glanced over my shoulder at Nick, my hardened face in no mood for such locker room antics.

“What? I didn’t say blow, I said eat,” Nick said in a voice a half-octave higher than usual. He shrugged his shoulders—the innocent one.

Two seconds ticked by, then we all broke out in laughter, Nick and Brad looking like two braying donkeys in hysterics. I covered my mouth as I snorted out my chuckle in a feeble attempt to not act like one of the boys.

An odd *déjà vu* sensation swept through my mind. Something from my past had again crept to the edge of my memory. Something about how I viewed most guys. I let it bounce around for a couple of seconds. The only thing that stuck was realizing I felt this strong push to compete against—no, check that—to beat any guy who fell into my crosshairs.

“Okay, I’m hungry as hell, Brad, so give it up.” I’d kicked out my chair with the back of my calves and was standing there, flipping my hand impatiently. “I’m talking about the pizza box.”

A snicker from Nick almost ignited another outburst.

Brad held the box shoulder high. “You’ll give me more time on the request?”

“I’ll give you my son. Or maybe I’ll pull out my Glock. I haven’t decided which.”

He held out a hand and set the box on the table as if he were feeding a caged lion. He was.

I opened the box and found less than half a pizza, two of the pieces ripped apart, and it was anything but fresh.

“What the hell, Brad?”

“I asked my team of research analysts to work through lunch. Got an important investigation that required some quick turnaround. Sorry.”

I flopped back into my chair, my eyes barely catching his for more than a second, then scooped up the first piece and tore off a bite.

“How is it?” Nick said, tossing a handful of yogurt raisins into his mouth. “I think I can tell.”

I leaned over and grabbed a paper towel to push back into my mouth any food remnants that had escaped.

Once I’d devoured the first piece, I finally took in a full breath. “It’s cold pizza. Reminds me of college.”

“Seriously?” Nick asked, sitting forward.

I nodded and picked up my second piece. I could recall sitting on the floor of the dorm hallway, splitting a massive pizza with four or five other girls. It was late at night, and we’d all just gotten back from a club. I believe we were all having a good laugh at my expense, something about my dancing prowess looking similar to that of Elaine from Seinfeld. I remembered one girl saying, “How the hell are you coordinated enough to play college tennis, but you look like you’re tripping on PCP whenever you hit the dance floor?”

I heard a bottle tap the table, and I woke up from my trance to hear Brad and Nick giggling like teenage girls. I also spotted a water bottle, so without asking, I cracked the top and chugged a third of it.

“Okay,” I said, allowing my back to touch the chair. The other two stopped their gossiping and turned to face me. “Why don’t you have what I requested?”

“Alex, I just told you. I’m trying to get the Boston PD to play nice with the small-town police department in Lowell. It takes some—”

“Negotiating.” Brad’s diminutive colleague, Gretchen, appeared from behind Brad, holding two sheets of paper.

She gave me a quick wink, then addressed Brad. Something about her seemed different.

“You scared me, Gretchen. Whatcha got?” While looking over her shoulder, he shifted his eyes over the pages.

“It took about ten phone calls and a couple of promises of return favors, but the two departments finally agreed to swap information about their murders.”

“Starting with the COD and weapon used?” I couldn’t help but jump in.

Both heads turned to me, then Brad grabbed one of the pages from Gretchen’s hand and flipped it on the table.

“That’s exactly what we’ve got,” Brad said, walking past me.

Gretchen picked up the remote and punched the red button, then tapped the tablet that was on the table.

A blue screen morphed into a massive picture of a knife.

“Both departments are fairly certain the perp used a SOG SE37N SEAL Team blade.”

“A former Navy SEAL?” I asked, taking another mouthful of water.

“Not necessarily,” Gretchen said. “The knives, while not commonplace, can be purchased in the private sector.”

I nodded. “Good work, Gretchen.”

“I told you we would come through for you,” Brad said with a wink.

“Sure you did, Brad.” I wiped my mouth with the paper towel, then lifted from my chair, energized by the intake of food.

“To answer your original question, do I think J. L. Cobb was telling us the truth when he hinted at having an accomplice? It’s possible.”

Nick jumped up from his seat. “We debated this back and forth on the plane ride back.”

“A very rocky plane ride that almost made me hurl my bologna sandwich.”

“True,” he said. “Anyway, this guy has a lot of issues going on in his life. It’s a fact that he has Asperger’s, and it’s obvious he hasn’t socially adapted to life in prison. He’d basically been beaten up and tortured.”

“But having Asperger’s doesn’t mean he’s crazy.”

“You’re right, Alex. In fact, if I hadn’t been there to see his behavior in person, I might not think what I do.”

“Which is?”

“He’s lost his marbles. Plain and simple.”

“You’re too good of an investigator, Nick, to just make a cut-and-dried statement like that and move on.”

He looked away and smacked his lips, a sure sign he wasn’t fond of my comment.

“We can’t overlook other possible reasons for why he behaved that way.”

“Okay, shoot.”

I held up my hand and tapped one finger at a time. “First, and most obvious, you said he’s got major social anxiety. In prison, his new colleagues are giving him hell for being different. His odd behavior could be connected to the stress and trauma. Very possible.”

“Possible, yes.”

“Second, it was all staged, just to throw us in a different direction.”

Nick’s face suddenly seemed intrigued.

“Cobb’s a smart son of a bitch. Brilliant, right? He even bragged as much by breaking into the motel reservation system. But he could have been teasing us with this idea that he was working with another person.”

“A woman at that.”

“A woman. He knows his trial is coming up. His defense attorney could be telling him to act crazy. That would lead to a guilt-by-insanity defense. Or the attorney could have told him to use every opportunity to throw other theories out there.”

I looked squarely at Brad. “Have you had time to go through the transcripts of his previous interviews with the assistant US Attorney assigned to his case?”

“I just started and—”

Gretchen’s miniature hand touched Brad’s arm. “And I finished it. No mention of any accomplice, any help at all. When they asked him prying questions about how he got the names of his potential victims, he brushed it off. Same response on your wrecks. He didn’t jump up and say he made you crash—”

“Twice.” I punched out two fingers.

“Twice, right. He couldn’t provide a plausible reason how that happened. I’m sure the defense will use that to question whether the evidence shows that he murdered those men beyond a reasonable doubt.”

An air of silence fell over our space, none of us sure what to say.

It was my awkward moment, so I spoke up first. “Thanks for doing the leg work, Gretchen.”

Nick began to wag a finger in my direction. “If memory serves me correctly, didn’t you once hypothesize that the ring killer might have had a female pulling his strings? Especially when we thought one of the scorned wives might be leading the vigilante mission?”

“Yep, I did. And if Cobb’s mumblings are correct, then that theory just might be correct.”

“Ah shit, Alex. You just want your damn theory to be right.”

Without looking their way, I could sense Brad and Gretchen tense up. “Maybe. But I only want to be right if it *is* right,” I said with a little too much ferocity.

I could feel my heart racing. The thought of being in the room with my husband’s killer was getting to me again. Was I pissed at myself that I didn’t nail him to the wall? Dissecting my own thoughts had started to add to my frustration.

“Sorry, Nick. Didn’t mean to take it too far.”

He came up and put his arm around my shoulder. “We’re like brother and sister.” He held up a closed hand. “Don’t leave me hanging, Alex.” We gave each other a fist bump.

Running my fingers through my hair, I glanced at the paper that showed the COD for Ben Murphy.

“Did the Lowell PD ever find and question the vic’s wife?”

“Nancy,” Brad said. “Yes, they did. I got a call from Detective Charlie Tan this morning. He’d just finished questioning her. She’d been at his sister’s house in Gloucester. She was devastated, he said. She personally had an alibi

during the window Ben could have been killed.”

“Murder for hire?”

“I asked him that.” Brad scratched his face, which had as much growth as a two-day beard. “Said they still need to dig into her personal life more, but he’d be shocked if anything turned up. She was, what did he say, a basket case.”

“What about the bomb they found in the sewing case?”

“Turns out the daughter was taking some type of advance pyrotechnics class at the community college, and that was one of her projects.”

“And our good buddy at the ATF couldn’t figure that out? Sheesh.”

The table rocked a bit, and I looked over at Gretchen, who’d put all of her weight on it, which wasn’t much. “So where does that leave us?” she asked.

Biting my bottom lip, I meandered over to the big screen and got a close-up of the murder weapon.

“The person who killed Ben Murphy must have killed before, Navy SEAL or not,” I said with my back to the group. “Lots of questions to answer.”

“Starting with, is this perp connected to Cobb or not?” Nick said, walking my way.

I nodded. “The two vics were killed in a far different manner than Cobb carried out his work. No water, no grandiose vignette with rings and cinderblocks.” I could feel my lungs suddenly beg for more air, perhaps my subconscious trading places with Mark moments before the tide took him under for the last time.

Nick nudged my shoulder. “You with us?”

“Uh, yeah.” I flipped around to face Brad and Gretchen. “I know evidence has shown the same weapon was used on Monty and Ben Murphy, but can we be certain it was the exact same weapon? I’m sure the SOG company has made more than one knife.”

Nick reached for my arm. “Alex, you can’t be suggesting that two different people killed Monty and Ben Murphy?”

I reached a chair, anchoring my arms on the back. “We need to see if there is any way their lives overlapped. When it first happened, I couldn’t imagine it. Still can’t. But that doesn’t mean something isn’t there.”

“At a high level, though, I know Ben Murphy fit the formula of the cheating husband. Monty wasn’t married or even dating, according to the Boston PD.”

I huffed out a breath. “I know, I know. That’s what makes no sense. None. We need to do the legwork and hope that something comes up.”

Gretchen raised a hand. “I’m on it, Alex.”

“So, we’re hoping that we have another serial killer on the loose?” Brad asked.

“Just looking for a pattern right now, Brad. Something to point us in a

direction. Which brings us back to the original debate. Do we believe J. L. Cobb or not? Could there be some woman out there taking over from where he left off?"

"It's just impossible for me to think that Cobb was able to maintain any type of relationship with a woman. It's preposterous," Nick said.

I paced the length of the room and walked back to the group.

"What time is the assistant US Attorney showing up for us to debrief her on our interview with Cobb?"

Nick looked at his watch while fighting back a yawn. "Thirty minutes, I think."

I gave him a quick eye nod. "We could be looking at three different investigations here. One with Cobb and his story—fiction or not—Monty's murder, and then Ben's death."

The group started to break up, but I couldn't shake my interaction with Cobb. "One more thing. Brad, Gretchen, I need for you to look into Cobb one more time."

"I thought that was the responsibility of the assistant US Attorney?" Gretchen asked.

"It is. She's going to be focused on getting a conviction. More power to her. But we need to figure out what the hell Cobb is really up to. Is he playing us, in particular, me? We need to check the background on anyone he's come in contact with. Maybe a chance encounter turned out to be much more than that."

Nick started whistling the same tune we'd heard back at the prison.

"While you're at it, break down the lyrics of *Maggie May*," I said.

Brad's youthful forehead creased a bit. "*Maggie May*?"

Gretchen touched his shoulder. "Rod Stewart, the British rocker-turned-crooner. Maybe there are a couple of things I can teach you."

As they turned to walk away, Gretchen smiled at me as she curled a lock of hair around her ear. I could see she was enjoying her work, or whom she was working with.

I snapped my fingers. "She added streaks of red to her hair. That's the difference."

"Don't know what you're talking about. Don't want to know. Let's go meet with the US Attorney and get out of here." Nick started walking out of the war room, and I followed him.

I let out a yawn, my eyelids suddenly heavy. "I could use a workout, but I think I just need a slow night at home curled up with a book and Pumpkin at my side. Of course, the kids need to be there as well. Luke trolling the house with his drone and Erin blasting her music."

"Sounds like heaven," Nick said.

"I can't forget Ezzy either. She's the glue that holds us together. But she's also making me fat with her home-cooked Guatemalan food." I tried pinching an inch at my waist.

“Yeah, right. You’re built like a brick house.”

“If you weren’t gay, I’d say you’re hitting on me, Nick.”

“Nah. Just a fan of the Commodores.”

I shook my head as two people entered the conference room. One dressed to the nines—obviously a lawyer—and the other our red-faced boss, Jerry.

I knew we were in for trouble.

“What do you expect, Troutt? The crime scene is almost twenty-four hours old.”

“But your team and the NYPD have only been here for, what, twelve hours or so?”

I inched closer to the FBI special agent, my forehead just inches away from his chin.

The man, whom upon first glance an hour earlier had instantly made me wonder if he was a reincarnation of Mark, my deceased husband, stepped over to a portable table that contained several photos, fortunately taking the clue that I was in no mood for anyone’s bullshit. Not after jumping on my second plane trip of the day—now nearing ten o’clock at night. Not after spending hours dissecting the motivations or possible hidden messages of a serial killer...and then trying to figure out how two murders in a span of a few hours of each had anything to do with said serial killer.

What I’d hoped would be a quiet night at home with my family, a fat cat, and a juicy novel had taken an abrupt turn to the morose when Jerry walked into the meeting room back in Boston. He gave us a quick debrief on two murders that had taken place overnight in Brooklyn, and on the surface, both had similar characteristics to the two we were investigating in the greater Boston area—even though we weren’t convinced the two on our home turf were committed by the same person.

Regardless, Nick and I knew we couldn’t waste the opportunity to check out the crime scene. Which is how we’d ended up in an abandoned meat-packing warehouse in Brighton Beach, a small enclave in Brooklyn, the largest community of Russians in the country, I was told.

“Carella,” I called out just as Nick reentered the building.

The special agent out of the FBI New York office kept his back to me. I could see him hold up a photo just as Nick intercepted my path.

“Can you believe it? We fly all the way down here, and there’s no body. They frickin’ hauled the body off. Why in the hell would they ask for our assistance if they didn’t wait for our instruction?”

I could practically feel the steam pouring from my ears.

“Alex, it sucks, but we can’t do anything about it now,” Nick said, guiding me away from Carella, through a bevy of hooks that would normally hold slabs of meat.

“But it’s bullshit, Nick.” I slapped a hand into the opposite palm. “How can we be expected to solve all these fucking murders and figure out what role Cobb might still be playing in it when we’re at such a disadvantage? They might as well cuff us too. Fuck!”

I paced within a ten-foot radius as I bit my lip. Three laps into my

attempt to lower my anxiety, I coughed a couple of times and felt my chest tighten. I grabbed my knees as Nick's voice echoed in my head. Leaning over, I closed my eyes, and for the second time that day, I transferred myself to another time and place.

A warm breeze tousled my shoulder-length hair as I plodded through the clear, shallow water on South Padre Island. The current receded, and I stopped, only to feel the ocean pulling me from the shore, the rush of wet sand sliding over my feet. I smiled as my feet sunk about three inches. Then I yanked my legs upward and kept walking, my eyes scanning the shoreline for...I couldn't recall exactly.

"There's no way you're hyperventilating, are you?" I could feel Nick's hand on my back.

Opening my eyes, I stared at the stained, chipped concrete, wondering how many times the hooks had been dropped over the years.

"We're at sea level, Nick. Hyperventilating would normally occur in the mountains, right?"

The intensity of my voice had been cut in half. I took in another dose of air, wishing it smelled of the salty sea or maybe sunblock. Instead, I coughed as my senses were invaded by a stench that resembled raw eggs.

"What the hell has this place been used for since it officially shut down?" I asked, searching for the cause of the foul smell.

"No idea, Alex. It's actually a little creepy. Dead girl found sliced up in a meat house."

"Going to have nightmares?" I deadpanned.

"Did I tell you I used to wet my bed when I was a kid?" Nick asked.

"TMI, Nick."

He rested a hand on my shoulder. "My older sister had been letting me watch horror movies and eat junk food late at night when my parents were out of the house. The combination got me all worked up."

Twisting my lips, I said, "Is the moral of this story that if I don't figure out a way to lower my stress, I'm going to need to start wearing a diaper to bed? If so, that sure wouldn't be a great way to attract a new man in my life."

He shook his head and tried to keep from grinning. "Look, you've been through some crazy shit the last few months. And now we're knee deep in the same murder investigation that's very personal for you. I just don't want to see you go off the deep end."

"There is a pier just across the Boardwalk," I said.

"Funny."

I reached up and tapped his face lightly. "You're a good man, Nick. The big brother I never had. I'm good. I'll be better once we gather up all the crazies and put them behind bars."

I heard a throat clear, and then I noticed the black trench coat of Carella approach us.

"Hey," he said. "This job...it can get the best of you before you know

what hit you. And at times it feels like the psychos are multiplying like zombies. But unfortunately, you can't tell shit from their appearance. They blend in with the rest of society. Sometimes figuring out who committed the murder is almost as achievable as landing a guy on Mars."

"Or a girl." I gave him a tight-lipped smile.

"Yeah, that too." He chuckled a couple of times, lessening the professional tension.

I noticed his shoulders weren't quite as broad as Mark's, and his nose was slightly larger. What the hell, Alex? I'm breaking down this guy like he was a runway model auditioning to play the role of Alex's next leading man. And yet I knew that was the last thing I wanted.

Or was it?

"Do you mind if we start over?" I asked.

"From the top," he said, flapping a handful of pictures in front of me. I grabbed them and began to inspect the content of each one.

"The killer used some type of hunting knife and sliced her up pretty good, as you can see."

He reached in and sifted through the photos. "This one here, it's..." He wiped his face and inhaled. "It's fucked up, that's what it is. But it gives you the best vantage point for how the victim was situated when we arrived on the scene."

Her mouth had been sliced from ear to ear and half her tongue had been chopped off.

"The local ME said he can already see that the blade was both flat edge and serrated. So that narrows down our murder weapon right there."

"He's already got a COD?" I asked, lifting my eyes from the photos, focusing less on the gore and more on the facts, if for no other reason than to keep my mind reasonably clear and sane.

"While it seems obvious by looking at the photos, it's not. This lady was into all sorts of crap. Needle marks up and down her arms, between her toes. Who knows the exact COD? Could have been a drug deal gone bad."

"If it was a drug deal gone bad, you wouldn't have called us."

"Good point."

My eyes gravitated back to the photo, and I tried to imagine how a human being could perform such a violent act. "This perp was...infuriated either at the vic or something going on in his life."

"Or her life," Nick said.

"Any witnesses?"

"The NYPD uniforms have scoured the area, and no one saw anyone come down this alley," Carella said.

"Tell me more about the vic. What do we know about her?"

"Actually had her purse on her. We found some marijuana and an empty bottle of narcotics. I think she was a major junkie, so the pot probably didn't do much for her."

I studied the photo closer. “It appears she’s wearing a waitress outfit?”

“Yeah. It’s hard to see, though, with all the blood everywhere. Name is Karina Leshev. Born and raised here in Brighton Beach. Family either died off, moved away, or went to prison.” He arched an eyebrow, bringing with it another quick image of Mark. “According to her license, she’s thirty-seven years old. We believe she was living with one roommate. We haven’t confirmed her graduation date, but she attended the local high school—Grady.”

I nodded, ignoring the pictures for a moment.

“We weren’t called to the scene until just before noon. She’d been dead for at least ten hours or so, the coroner surmised.”

“Where does she work? Have you interviewed her coworkers yet?”

“Works as a waitress at one of the more well-known places here in Brighton Beach—Tatiana. It’s a restaurant and nightclub.”

“She worked last night?”

“We believe so. I have two agents over there right now conducting interviews.”

“Surely they have video cameras. We can look through those and try to spot anyone who might have followed Karina out of the restaurant.”

Carella’s lips drew a straight line. “That was the first question we asked.”
“And?”

“They’re old school, they said. No need for cameras since they have a reputation of being a little rough on anyone who screws them over.”

Nick scratched his hairless chin. “Now that’s a different angle. Maybe there was some type of restaurant politics, or, better yet, given her addiction issues, maybe Karina stole from Tatiana. The owners found out and decided she needed to be taught a lesson.”

“If I hadn’t seen the body, I’d think your theory was plausible. But whoever committed this crime’s got some serious issues. Serious. Now that doesn’t rule out someone at the restaurant. An emotional love triangle or another addict involved in some way?” Carella suggested.

“Again, if you believed any of that was possible, you wouldn’t have called us down,” I said.

Carella blew out a breath. “I’m trying to let the evidence dictate my opinion, but you’re right. Again.”

Pinching the corners of my eyes, I let all the data collate in my brain, wondering if the combined information would naturally point me in a direction that made sense. The brutality of the murder, even the type of weapon, was similar to the murders of Monty and Ben Murphy. But this victim was a woman, so any theory of the perp strictly targeting men, even philandering men, was no longer a consideration. Each of the three murders had similarities—enough to pull my thoughts toward Cobb’s involvement or maybe some type of apprentice taking over where he left off. But in other respects, such as the selection of victims and the rage exhibited by the perp,

made it seem like they were all unique. That took my thoughts in another direction.

“Are you thinking the same thing I am?” I blinked my eyes and turned to Nick.

“Copycat killer?”

“You got it. Not sure if Cobb’s little tease about a woman helping him out, possibly carrying on the murders, is believable. On top of that, we’re two hundred miles south of where the last murder took place.”

“Only twenty-four hours between the homicides,” Nick said.

Carella raised a hand, but I didn’t want to interrupt my brainstorming session with Nick.

“Then again, we’re not all riding mules. A person could navigate down here any number of ways.”

“But we know that most serial killers like to stay in one area, even blend in with the crowd,” Nick said.

“Just like Cobb.”

“Can I speak now?” Carella asked.

“What?” Nick and I responded in tandem.

“Cobb. I heard stories about him. He’s the Ring Killer, right? Submerged his victims in the bay waters, then threw cinderblocks on them as the tide rolled in and watched them drown to death.”

The image of Mark broke out of its protective box, the one I’d created in my mind when I learned he’d been killed just like Cobb’s other victims. My pulse doubled in no time.

“Guys, I’ll let you continue discussing the case. I need a quick dose of fresh air.”

As I started walking for the door, dodging two uniforms, Nick said, “The weather is getting nasty out there.”

“Good. I need something to break me out of this funk.”

Stepping out the door, I was hit with a gust of wind that nearly caused me to lose my balance. As I made my way to the Boardwalk, veiny flashes of lightning splintered the dark sky, shooting up from the ocean, followed shortly by rumbles of thunder. I turned right at the Boardwalk, moving away from the activity near the crime scene, and picked up my pace. My extremities tingled from the natural blood flow.

Water sprayed my face. At first, I wasn’t sure if it came from the waves off to my left or from the spastic rain. I didn’t care. I closed my eyes and let the water coat my face, drip down my chin. It was invigorating.

Hot breath swept by my ear at the same moment a sharp instrument jabbed my side.

“Don’t say a fuckin’ word,” a man growled.

I turned my head but was met with a fist to the jaw. I stumbled, tried to look for the cops and federal agents, but the distant lights were a blur. As I got to my feet, I heard a roar. I turned just as the man lowered his shoulder and

rammed into me, his knife penetrating my FBI windbreaker, puncturing my skin. I yelled out.

“Shut the fuck up and get in the alley,” he hissed.

Before I stopped rolling, I reached at my waist for my Glock. I touched leather, and my heart skipped a beat.

“You think I was stupid enough to not know you carried a gun? Fuckin’ amateur.”

I pushed up with my arms, but then he punched his knee against the side of my head. I dropped to the ground with my ears ringing and motes of light flickering in my vision.

A quick kick to my gut. It felt like a sledgehammer. I couldn’t breathe. I wasn’t in a position to fight back, and he was still coming at me. I’d yet to assess who I was dealing with, although each kick or punch was helping to form an opinion.

With my side stinging like hell, I scooted and crawled toward a black hole, a single trash can sitting at the edge of the alley. A massive clap of thunder coincided with a double burst of lightning, allowing me a quick glance at my assailant. Under his gray hoodie, an L-shaped scar caught my eye. His mouth hung open as he pumped out breath like an animal in heat. He was missing at least two teeth in the middle of his top row of teeth.

Just then, he swung his leg. I spotted a boot with no shoelaces headed for my ribs. I rolled toward the mouth of the alley, and the boot glanced off my side at the exact spot where I’d been stabbed. It took my breath away. Again.

“Fuckin’ bitch. Get in there. You’re going to die with all the other rats.”

This must be the guy. Karina’s killer.

Lifting to one knee, I couldn’t see a damn thing around me, so I used my hands to feel for something to defend myself. The concrete was coated with a sticky goo, and I caught a waft of something putrid. At that moment, my hand landed on a tin can as the man dropped lower. I gritted my teeth and swung back with my arm, hoping to at least make him flinch.

“Ah! You fucking cut me.”

Even better.

He stumbled back two steps, brought a hand to his face.

Still gasping for air, I shoved my body to a standing position. Even with him ten feet away, I still had to crane my neck to see the top of his head. His silhouette filled up the alley.

I jerked my head left and right, still searching for something I could use as a legitimate weapon.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

He chuckled once and walked toward me. “Because I hate cunts like you who pry into other people’s business.”

Crouched in an athletic position, I shuffled my feet backward, wondering if I could charge him, then spin, and make it out to the Boardwalk.

“Is that why you killed Karina?”

“Ha!” is all he said.

I bumped up against something metal, nowhere to go. Two quick steps, and he was in front of me, swinging his knife down toward my neck. I lunged and hit him with everything I had, right in the gut. His torso folded and his arm dropped. I grabbed his wrist and tried to bite into it. Just as my teeth hit skin, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and flung me like a plastic doll, twisting my neck in the process.

“Biting like a typical little bitch,” he growled.

I came to a stop against a brick wall. Scooting up, my fingers strummed against something metal. A trash can lid? I leaped to my feet, spun, and rammed it against the jaw of the charging Neanderthal. The impact jarred my whole body. I turned to run, but he grabbed my jacket as he fell backward. I had no choice but to go with the momentum, and I drove my legs with every ounce of energy left in me. I could hear myself screaming as he landed with an unforgiving thud, my shoulder digging into his sternum.

He groaned, started to turn on his shoulder. That was when I noticed his hands. No knife. Flipping around on my knee, I frantically pawed at the grungy ground for the knife.

“Where the hell is it?” Desperate to find the weapon before he could attack, my voice pitched higher. “Where—”

He groaned and started kicking and pawing at me.

Our legs got tangled as his boots kicked at my legs, but I continued sliding my hands along the wet pavement. A plastic bag, pebbles, a small carton. A nasty grime jammed under my fingernails.

“You broke my ribs, bitch!” And then he howled like a wild bear, as he lunged upward and hooked his paw around my collar.

Right then, my fingers found something long, thin. A flexible wire of some sort. No, a jagged piece of a coat hanger.

He yanked me back, but I gripped the hanger and jabbed it over my head.

He yelped like a wounded animal. Bullseye. I’d hit soft tissue.

“My fucking eye!”

I jumped off his torso, but he was still alert. He kicked out his boot and clipped my shoes. I tumbled straight down, and my chin bounced off the concrete.

“Fuck,” I murmured.

A second later, he was on top of me, yelling something I couldn’t understand as he pummeled my back and kidneys with shot after shot. I was pinned down, no way of wiggling loose. It felt like my organs were about to shut down, the pain so unbearable.

A squeak in my left ear. I looked that way, and a rat the size of a football scurried by.

“What the hell?” the man said, suddenly distracted.

That was my chance. I twisted and thrust my knee upward, connecting with his groin. He listed toward the right as air rushed from his lungs. I

realized the hanger was still in my hand. As he began to fall, I whipped the hanger around his neck, grabbed the other end, and tugged with all my might.

“Get. The. Fuck. Off. Biiitch,” he said in sputtering gasps.

I didn’t want to kill him, but I had to incapacitate him long enough for me to take control, get help.

He swung his mitts over his head, slapping my face a couple of times. I dug my feet into his side, re-gripped my moist fingers on the metal, and tugged again. Even harder.

Shoes clipped off wooden planks behind me.

“Alex,” someone called out.

“Back here,” I yelled through clenched teeth.

“Alex.” The voice sounded more distant.

“I’m in the alley!” I yelled until it felt like my veins would pop out of my neck.

The steps came quicker now, from wooden planks and then to concrete.

“Alex, where are you?”

“Right in front of you, dammit.”

“Holy shit, woman.”

Carella pulled his Glock as I heard my assailant gagging.

“Alex, you can let go. I’ve got my gun on him.”

I did as he said, but the beast was still partially on me. I flailed and kicked until I was out from under him, back on my feet.

“It’s okay.”

The next few seconds, I heard Carella on his radio and the man still gagging. I stumbled back toward the Boardwalk just as Nick jogged up.

I fell into his arms, saying, “We caught him, Nick. Karina’s killer. We got the son of a bitch.”

Sitting in the back of an ambulance, I could see a mist floating across the dark sky and a single yellow spotlight glowing from the nearby corner as a throng of people gathered behind yellow tape.

I felt a piercing sting on my chin, and I flinched.

“Agent Troutt, I need you to sit still please.” A medic with a decent potbelly splayed his arms. I wasn’t sure which was thicker, his waistline or his distinct accent.

“Where are you from?” I tried to make small talk. Anything to take my mind off the pain in my chin and my side, which he’d already treated.

“Yankee Stadium was five blocks one way, and three blocks the other way was the home of one Miss Jennifer Lopez. Straight from the Bronx, lady.” I think he belched. “No disrespect.”

“Of course not. And congrats on your brush with fame.”

He shifted his weight on his knee, and I felt another stab in my chin.

“Grr!”

“If you don’t sit still, I’m going have to take you to the emergency room. That or cuff you.”

“I’ll throw on the cuffs if you need me to.” Agent Carella curled around the ambulance door, a smile painted on his stubbly face.

I didn’t want that topic going a step further. “Thanks for saving my life,” I said through a closed jaw as the medic continued working on my chin.

“*Your* life?” Carella scoffed. “Hell, I think I saved that asshole’s life.”

I snickered.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to let go of that hanger until you cut right through his neck and severed his carotid artery.”

The medic shifted his eyes to Carella, then went back to working on my chin.

“Did the asshole admit to anything yet?” I asked.

Nick approached the back of the ambulance and chimed in, “He just kept repeating one thing.”

“Yeah?”

““Give me five minutes alone with that bitch. I’ll kill her with my bare hands.””

“He would have succeeded in about four minutes had I not blindly found that hanger.”

“You sure you don’t have some Irish blood in you? Damn lucky you didn’t get yourself killed,” Carella said.

The medic pulled away and started cleaning up the mess.

“You act like I invited him over for dinner after running into him at the grocery.”

“No, I’m just sayin’.”

I raised a playful eyebrow, and Carella replied with another grin.

I could already feel Nick’s glare and read his mind: he thought Carella and I had this little thing going. He was wrong, at least in my mind.

“Found this at the edge of the Boardwalk.” Nick handed me my Glock. I checked the ammo and slid it back into my holster.

“How did he get your gun away from you?” Nick asked.

“Who knows? Even with his size, he moved like a frickin’ ninja. He got up on me before I knew a soul was there. Stabbed me once, then I became his punching bag, tumbling into the alley.”

I wiggled my jaw and felt the bandages stretch against my skin.

“Looks like you were tossed a little chin music,” Carella said with another sly grin, pretending to throw a punch.

Wait, Mark had said that once. Maybe more. At one of the many baseball games we’d attended.

My eyes drifted, and I started nodding off, recalling his explanation to Luke.

“Alex, did you hear me?”

I blinked and glanced up to see Carella’s hand moving to my shoulder. His eyes shifted to Nick and then the medic.

“Guys, nothing to worry about. A few nicks and bruises.”

“She suffered a pretty traumatic head injury a couple of months back,” Nick said to the others.

“I wonder if she might need to go in for a CAT scan, get seen by a real doctor.” The medic slipped off his rubber gloves as he addressed only Nick and Carella.

I whistled, and three heads turned my way.

“I’m right here, and I can hear you,” I said, waving a hand. “Let’s just drop it.” I turned to eye Nick. “You know I’m not getting near another damn hospital.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I had to tell him.”

“Whatever. This perp. What else do we know about him? He might have killed Karina, but what about the others?”

Carella pulled a small notepad out of his coat, licked his fingers, and flipped a few pages.

“He wasn’t carrying any wallet or ID, but we did find his dog tags tucked under his T-shirt. He must have forgotten he had them on, is my best guess.”

Lifting his eyes for just a moment, Carella waited until Nick and I acknowledged his thought process with quick nods.

The New York-based agent squinted and moved the wrinkled note pad closer to his eyes, then farther away.

“A regular Columbo,” I said mockingly. “It might help if you switched to something more modern than hieroglyphics.”

“Ha. That’s not really the issue. Well, my handwriting sucks. Don’t tell

my SSA, but I might need readers.”

“Could have fooled us,” Nick said, winking at me.

I climbed out of the ambulance and could see a good fifty to sixty bystanders gawking at the bustling crime scene.

“And?”

“Well, okay. His name is Bruno Chappaletti. Lives in the Bronx.”

“Hey, I might know him,” the medic said with an eager smile.

“Not sure you want to claim this guy as your BFF. Unless you have the same complex that drew people to John Gotti,” Carella added.

The medic’s eyebrows pushed together to form a single line. “Gotti? Who’s he?”

I chuckled. “You’re too young to remember, I guess. He’s a mobster who somehow became a cult hero to many living in his community, even with evidence showing he robbed, assaulted, and killed people. Come to think of it, that strange fascination is kind of similar to what we see on the Internet today. A herd of people blindly following the biggest blowhard, regardless of what bullshit is spewing out of his mouth.”

“Amen to that.” The medic lifted his fist, and I bumped it.

“Bruno from the Bronx,” I reiterated, looking at Carella to continue.

He nodded. “At least that’s what popped up on our first search. We’ll need to confirm everything about him. This guy could have stolen Bruno’s dog tags just to lead us on a wild goose chase.”

“It’s possible.”

Nick stepped in the middle of our little circle as accordion music could be heard in the background. “It just hit me. Bruno from the Bronx did say one more thing during the on-site interview. ‘Semper Fi.’”

“The Marine saying, ‘always faithful.’” I slid my fingers along my side and recalled how powerful Bruno had been.

“If this guy truly is Bruno,” Carella added.

I smirked. “I like your attitude. Question everything and everyone.”

A quick arch of an eyebrow, and he said, “We did all go through the same training at Quantico, correct?” He patted his coat. Finally, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and stuck a single one in his mouth. “You guys mind?”

It was lit and he’d puffed out his first smoke signal before we could respond.

My sights followed the smoke curling up into the sky. “This guy had special training. Must have. We need to confirm when he was in the Marines and if he was a part of any additional Special Forces group.”

“It’s called Force Recon in the Marines,” Nick said.

“Okay, that.” I pointed at Carella.

“Well, now they call it Raiders, but that’s a recent development.”

“Can you confirm his complete role in the military?”

“Sure. I’ll add it to my list.” Carella pulled out a pen, tried writing in his pad, then started flicking the pen.

“By noon. I need the data by noon.”

“I’ll do my best. You know DC. They tend to work on their own timetable.”

I blew out a tired breath; the sudden infusion of adrenaline during the fight for my life had drained me.

“I know we want to think Bruno committed all these murders, but we’ve got to verify it with hard evidence.”

I started ticking off points with the fingers of my hand. “We need to compare the knife wounds on the other vics with the knife we recovered from Bruno.”

Flipping his thumb over his shoulder, Nick said, “It’s already bagged and headed straight to Quantico.”

“Cool.” Taking hold of my second finger, I continued. “This next one will take more than a couple of quick phone calls. Need to verify his whereabouts during the time of the other murders—Monty’s and the state police lieutenant’s.”

“I’ll be honest,” Carella said, taking a drag on his cigarette, then blowing the smoke out the side of his mouth. “We’re running a little thin on resources.”

A quick set of images of the attack flashed through my mind.

“He said something to me that might be pertinent. Or might not.”

“What was it?” Carella asked.

“In so many words, he said he didn’t like me prying into other people’s business.”

A blanket of silence fell over the group, and I could hear the same accordion playing in the background.

“Sounds like he knows you were at the two other crime scenes, or at least involved in the investigation,” Carella said.

I let those thoughts simmer for a couple of seconds.

I turned to Nick. “Let’s get Brad on the horn.”

Nick tapped his phone. “At almost midnight?”

“He says he lives and breathes the FBI. Besides, he can sleep when he’s dead.” The phrase rolled off my tongue with surprising familiarity.

Nick turned his head slightly, giving me a strange look.

“I think my dad drilled that into me when I was young. I don’t know.” I took in a puff of smoke and started coughing and waving the smoke away, which triggered an instant jolt of pain in my side.

“Sorry about that. The wind changed directions on me,” Carella said.

“No...problem,” I wheezed.

Nick tapped his phone with his thumb, then he paused and glanced up. “Aren’t we forgetting about one very important thing?”

“You’re right, Nick. The other guy who was murdered tonight. I completely lost focus on him since I was attacked.”

Carella tossed the butt of his cigarette to the ground and stepped on it.

“My bad, guys. I got distracted by all this crazy shit, even the moron playing the accordion.” He stepped back and scanned the army of uniforms around us. Then he returned. “I need to find my techie.”

“Techie?” Nick asked.

“A guy who does all my tech work for me. He can pull up the crime scene photos from his tablet. Wait, there he is.”

Carella curled his fingers in his mouth and released a whistle that probably woke up half of Brighton Beach. Then he waved his arm and said, “Yo, Tanner. Over here, kid.”

“That’s his version of our Brad,” Nick whispered to me.

“He’s your intelligence analyst?” I asked Carella, just as the kid, presumably Tanner, ran up to us, only a bit of peach fuzz above his lip.

“Yes sir.” Tanner stood at attention.

Nick and I covered our mouths, trying not to laugh out loud at the kid, but mostly at Carella for training him to be so subservient.

“Need those photos from the Pavlovich crime scene.”

“I’ll pull that right up for you. Just give me five seconds here.”

Carella craned his neck to look over Tanner’s shoulder. “We don’t have time to mess around, kid. Lives are at stake. This is the FBI.” He snapped his fingers twice, and Tanner literally flinched like a trained horse.

“Sir, more information has—”

“We’ll get to it. Just want to review all the crime scene photos with the two agents here from Boston.”

Tanner lifted his head and waved. I extended my hand. “Special Agent Troutt. This is Special Agent Radowski. Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, nice—”

“Hey, time on task here. The photos first,” Carella said.

The images lit up the screen, and Carella turned the tablet so we could all see it. He thumbed through one picture at a time as he provided the commentary.

“A liquor store just a few blocks from here. Been around forever, in the same family.”

He paused on one photo that showed the front counter, blood smeared across the top.

“A lot of frickin’ blood,” Nick said. “He must have really had something against this guy.”

A reserved Carella shook his head and said, “I’ve been stuck over here. This is my first time to actually see these.”

“The next five or six will really turn your stomach,” Tanner said.

The kid was right. Looking at the man’s front side, blood coated his jeans and shirt and every bit of exposed skin. The next shot showed his jeans ripped into shreds.

“What the—” Nick leaned closer to the tablet.

The three agents exchanged glances, and then Tanner broke the silence.

“Sir, we just got word—”

“I know, Tanner.” Carella looked straight at me. “This maggot, Bruno, castrated the vic. Can you believe that sick mother?” I could hear air stream from his nose.

“But that’s not the latest, dammit.” Tanner grabbed the tablet from Carella’s hand, his face and neck flush. It was easy to see why. The stress of dealing with gruesome murders could take its toll on even the calmest person.

“The MEs have found the man’s...” Tanner shifted his eyes to me. “You know.”

“We’re professionals, Tanner. All of us. Spit it out.”

“Okay. His cock and balls, sir. They found them stuffed down the man’s throat.”

Carella and Nick winced at the same time. While I’d heard countless people threaten such an act—including me—the threats were always in jest.

“This Bruno guy. He’s really a piece of work. To think he was actually walking the streets. Do we know his arrest record yet?” I asked.

Carella and Tanner both shook their heads.

“Agent Troutt, if I may?” Tanner held up a finger.

“You’ve got more to add?”

“Jesus, Tanner, what more could there be?” Carella asked, his face turning white.

“They found something else stuffed down the vic’s throat.”

“What’s that?”

“A tongue.”

The accordion off in the distance had just squealed out a high note, piecing my ear, which almost made me question what I’d just heard Tanner say. I took a breath and let the facts marinate.

“My bet is that it’s Karina’s tongue.”

“Agreed. It’s just too much of a coincidence. Someone is sending a message. I’m just not sure to who, though,” Nick said.

“For starters, to Karina and the guy. What’s his name?” Carella tapped Tanner on the shoulder.

“Mike Pavlovich. Lives in Brighton Beach. Married with two kids,” Tanner said.

A gust of wind whipped across my face, and I looked toward the crowd, staring at no one in particular.

“The liquor store has been passed down through the family, right?”

Carella glanced at Tanner, and they both nodded.

“The vic’s age. How old is he?”

“Let me check on his bio information real quickly,” Tanner said, his eyes scanning the screen for a few seconds. “He’s thirty-nine.”

“Does it say what high school he attended?”

He dipped his head and I could see his lips moving. Then he shifted his eyes upward. “Grady. The same as Karina.”

“They must have known each other.” Nick peeled open a wrapper and tossed a piece of gum in his mouth.

“If Karina and Mike knew each other, then what kind of message was Bruno sending by putting on this little show? How does it connect with the other murders?” Carella ran his fingers through his mane, then he searched for his pack of cigarettes again.

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly parched.

“I’m worried,” I said to Nick.

“The pieces don’t fit?”

“As much as I want to pin all of this on Bruno, I’m not sure he’s our guy. Maybe he’s involved. We talked about the copycat killer possibility, and that’s still plausible. But we’ve got to put some urgency into figuring out if he could have killed the others.”

I could see Nick punching up Brad’s number.

Carella pulled out another cigarette. “If it wasn’t before, this thing just got personal.”

Tanner spoke up and said. “Fucking A it did.”

Fresh drool had just rolled off my lips when I felt a thud on the mattress next to me.

I was so damn tired my pulse still ticked at the same reduced pace.

Then I heard a giggle. A Luke giggle.

Pulling my mind out of the cobwebs of sleep, I leaned up on one elbow and only saw an orange blur. Steel cotton—also known as Pumpkin’s tongue—licked my elbow.

“You haven’t fed the cat.”

“Your voice sounds like you’ve been smoking, Mom,” Luke said emphatically, ignoring my comment.

I stopped rubbing my eyes. “How would you know what smoking does to your voice?”

“Because Shane’s big sister’s boyfriend smokes a pack a day so he can have an extra-deep voice. He’s trying to become one of the top YouTubers out there.”

“Sounds rad.”

His face coiled into a twisted ball. “What the heck does rad mean?”

“Nothing. Only something we fogies say.”

“True dat.” He snapped his fingers and turned to head out of the bedroom as I focused on the clock.

I cupped my hand against my mouth. “Hey, dude, it’s almost seven thirty, and you’re still wearing your pajamas.”

He stuck his bushy head back in the door. “No prob, Mom. It’s PJ day. By the way, this is going to be my last year to do this. And I’m only doing it because my PJs look just like the pre-game sweats the Celtics wear.”

“Groovy.”

“You crack me up, Mom. Trying to be hip. But I still love you anyway.”

Did I just understand that conversation correctly? Seemed like Luke had just taken a giant leap forward into teenage-hood. A fluffy tail brushed against my face. I shoved Pumpkin off the bed and tried to pry the cat hair out of my mouth. When I hit the stairs, a waft of Latin spices ignited instant hunger pains.

As I shuffled through the living room, I called out to the nanny of the decade. “Ezzy, did you go to the trouble of making your famous breakfast tacos?”

The moment I crossed the threshold of the kitchen, I stopped in my tracks. I had to rub my eyes again to believe what I was seeing.

“Hey, Mom.” Erin was flipping a tortilla in a skillet as Ezzy sat at the bar, cupping a mug of coffee.

I gave Ezzy a look that said, *Who replaced my real daughter?* Ezzy

shrugged slightly and released a sly smile.

“The kids and I felt bad you had to work so late last night. We also guessed that you probably weren’t able to have a decent dinner. Am I right?”

“I ate a candy bar at LaGuardia,” I said, showing some teeth.

She leaned my direction, narrowing her wise eyes. “What kind of scrape did you get into this time, Dr. Alex?”

“Eh, nothing I couldn’t handle.” I plodded over to the counter and poured myself a mug of coffee. Before I took a sip, I held it up and said, “This is one-hundred-percent leaded, right?”

She nodded and said, “I woke up when you got home last night. As in about three hours ago.”

I gave her a half-bow, and then shuffled to Erin and put my arm around her. Just as I was about to nuzzle my nose into her hair and give her a kiss, she scooted over to the sink.

“Sorry, Mom. Need to clean up the mess.”

Shifting my sights back to Ezzy, we traded another round of surprised looks.

Just then, a car horn sounded.

“Oh crap, that’s Trish’s mom.”

“Don’t worry about the dishes, Erin,” Ezzy said.

“Thanks, Ezzy. You’re the best.” Erin dropped the skillet and headed for the mudroom. I spun right and reached for her, but I caught nothing but air.

“Why Trish’s mom?” I wondered if she’d already told me, but I’d forgotten. Too many thoughts about Cobb, his demented protégé—if he indeed had one—and all the images of the countless murder scenes.

I blinked it all away and tried a second time. “Why isn’t Ezzy taking you to school, or better yet, the school bus?”

She hopped back into the kitchen, and my eyes went straight for what was wedged under her arm.

“Is that a tennis racquet?”

“It’s a new flat iron, Mom.” She laughed, but no roll of the eyes.

“Seriously, Trish’s mom is taking us to tennis tryouts. Well, they’re not really tryouts, but they’re asking any new kids who want to try out to come to this camp-like thing.”

“Cool.”

“See ya.” Seconds later, the front door opened.

“Oh, where did you get the tennis racquet?” I called out.

“I found it at the bottom of your closet. Later.”

The door slammed shut just as Luke zoomed into the kitchen. “Gotta get to school early, Ezzy.”

I looked for my purse. “I can take him.”

“No worries,” she said, sliding her purse strap over her shoulder. “Rest some before you head back into work.”

I gave Ezzy a wink, then tried catching up to Luke. “You’re not getting

away from me without a kiss goodbye.”

“Oh yeah? Watch me,” he chortled while scooting under my arm and zipping out the back door.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen, my sore jaw hanging open.

“The kids are growing up,” Ezzy said with an arm on the back door.

“And that’s a good thing.”

“I’ll catch them later. If I’m going to keep doing this crazy job, I’ve got to have my Luke and Erin hugs.”

Ezzy winked and headed out.

I finally took a sip of my coffee, then I sat at the table and scarfed down a breakfast taco in about thirty seconds. The cat made his presence known by sitting on my foot and purring. The doorbell rang, and Pumpkin dug his back claws into my socked feet. We both jumped.

Opening the front door, I realized I’d forgotten to put on my robe. I clutched my chest.

“You didn’t get my text?” With a cell phone in one hand and a large cup of coffee in the other, Nick stood on my front porch, a demonic gaze in his eyes.

“Haven’t checked my phone.” I turned my head back to the kitchen, wondering if I’d forgotten to charge it overnight.

“Crap, Alex.” He stopped himself midsentence and slurped a mouthful of coffee. He’d yet to blink his eyes. “Emails, text messages are flying back and forth.”

“Sorry.” I wiped my eyes one more time. “I didn’t hear a thing until Luke dropped the cat on my bed. I was in deep sleep for all of about two whole hours.”

“Great. You’re sleeping in while this investigation is in deep shit. Or maybe not. Who knows? It’s a frickin’ cluster right now.”

I blew out a breath, channeling my thoughts and energy. When I took my sights off Nick’s wide-eyed facial expressions, I noticed his uncharacteristically rumpled appearance.

“Are you wearing the same suit as yesterday?”

He glared at his cell phone while gulping his coffee. “Maybe. I don’t know,” he said with an agitated tone.

A knot of his blue and gold tie was pulled from his neck all the way down to the third button on his shirt, which was partially untucked and wrinkled as hell. His pants looked like they’d been wadded up in a corner.

“Did you sleep in your clothes?”

He let out a guttural gasp. “Sleep? Who the hell can sleep? I tossed and turned on the couch for a couple of hours.”

“Antonio didn’t have a problem with that?”

“He knows I work for the FBI. And freaky shit happens when you work for the FBI. But you know that more than anyone.”

I could have sworn I saw his veins pulsating from his forehead. I had to

find a way to bring him back to Earth. Over Nick's shoulder, I could see a neighbor looking at us as she walked her dog. I gave her a quick wave.

"Sorry. Come on in, and let's sit down and discuss this."

I left him at the kitchen table and stuck a bowl of fruit in front of him while I ran upstairs to throw on some clothes. I walked into the kitchen while still buttoning the sleeves on my blue-and-white-striped blouse.

With her legs crossed and one arm draped over the wooden chair, Ezzy sat across from Nick, who was laughing so hard the sound had morphed into a machine-gun cackle.

"And that's the real story about the chicken getting its head cut off," she said while winking at me.

Nick belted out another ten-second cackle, then he noticed me as I fiddled with tying my hair back.

"Hey, Alex. Ezzy's cracking me up here." He wiped tears from his eyes, which had enormous bags under them.

"Glad you're chilling out." I fixed my second cup of coffee as Nick and Ezzy continued small talk, and then I joined them at the table.

Nick took the final bite of a pear. "Damn, that's good."

Ezzy spoke up, turning her playful gaze to me. "Glad to see someone enjoys the organic fruit I bought. Don't want to see good money go to waste."

I ignored the friendly dig, then touched Nick's arm. "Ten minutes ago, you were a live wire. Did Ezzy lace the pear with something I'm not aware of?"

"It's all about perspective, Alex. That's all she gave me, a better perspective."

"On our investigation?"

"Eh." He clammed up, and I looked at Ezzy.

"Nick had some negative thoughts in his head. Disturbing images from the gentleman who was killed in Brighton Beach."

I brought a hand to my mouth, covering my snicker. "All of this is because you saw a guy who had his wanker cut off and stuffed down his throat?"

Nick's face went blank. "That was the craziest shit I'd ever seen. It hurt me and I'd never met the guy before."

"But still, it wasn't you or anyone you knew."

He rested his hand on my arm. "Trust me. Ask any guy." His eyes looked to the corner, and I could see that his bulging blue vein on his forehead was less prominent. "Maybe that contributed to the cluster that started overnight."

He slid his phone around, and all I could see were dozens of text messages with lots of punctuation.

"Now that you're back in a rational state of mind, can you fill me in on what I missed?"

"Started with a quick group text from Tanner, Carella's guy."

"The baby-faced kid?"

“Right. Anyway, he just sends out a one-line text saying Bruno was verified to be the killer of both Karina and Mike Pavlovich. Then Carella replied with some pointed questions, and it just got out of control.”

I’d already picked up Nick’s phone and was trying to decipher the litany of paraphrased words and acronyms. “What does NWIFH mean?”

“Beats the crap out of me.” He let out an exhausted breath, then wiped his face, the loose skin under his eyes drooping like old-man breasts.

“No way in fucking hell.”

Nick and I swiveled our heads over to Ezzy, who was strumming her fingers on the table.

“I’m not one to curse, at least not out loud. But that’s what the kids say these days. Everything is a damn acronym.”

“And you know this how?”

“Erin asked me to read through a series of text messages. She wanted my opinion on whether a guy was flirting with her or not.”

“Uh-huh. And who said NWIFH?”

She swatted her hand. “Oh, one of her girlfriends. She didn’t know what she was talking about.”

“So Erin has a boy interested in her?” I asked, learning forward with both of my palms on the table.

“I think so. But things change day to day in high school.”

I made a mental note to quiz Erin later in a way that wouldn’t let her think I was actually quizzing her.

“You want to head into the office, see what Brad and Gretchen came up with, and find out if there’s even a case to still be investigating?” Nick leaned back and stretched his legs out under the table.

Pinching the corners of my eyes, I could feel the internal ping-pong battle resurface. I’d been trying to convince myself all night that Bruno was indeed the killer we were looking for, the sole perpetrator in the homicides against the sweet bar owner, Monty; the state police lieutenant, Ben Murphy; and now the pair in Brighton Beach. The cuts and bruises on my body were all the reminders I needed to know just how violent and brutal Bruno was. But just as quickly, I found myself arguing the other side—again—because of the cuts and bruises. The four murders were certainly violent, but they also appeared to have a purpose, and a pattern.

That couldn’t be said about Bruno’s attack on me.

Why even go after me? He ambushed me a hundred yards from a slew of law enforcement officials. Was he so out of control that he didn’t think about the possible risk? What else could be gained, other than trying to distract the investigation, or at least alter the focus to someone else?

Nick lifted from the table. “Traffic will suck, but let’s get the party started.”

Pushing the chair out, I paused, my mind volleying both sides of the argument until one data point lodged itself in the net. I thought about the

hours that might be wasted, wondering if someone else might die during that time.

“All the noise, the disturbing images, Bruno’s attack on me, everything... We have to ask ourselves: what if Bruno isn’t the killer?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out, isn’t it?”

“But he’s in custody. We’re tired as hell, everyone is overworked, freaked out by the sickening murders. We *want* him to be the killer.”

Nick rubbed his tired eyes. “You’re probably right.”

I tapped the table. “Have a seat, and let’s pull together a quick conference call. Ezzy, we’ll need more fruit.”

“Coming right up, Dr. Alex.”

Nick sent out a quick meeting invite, and we joined the bridge.

I took the lead, which shouldn’t have been surprising to anyone who knew me. Even Carella, who hadn’t known me long.

“Gentlemen, I hope everyone got at least a few good hours of sleep.”

Moans and groans of various octave levels and energy came from the speaker of Nick’s cell phone, which he’d set between us on the table.

“You’ve got at least one lady on the call too.”

I sat up. “Gretchen?”

“Here and accounted for.”

“Alex, this is Brad. I asked her to join us. She’s already done a good amount of digging. She needs to be kept in the loop firsthand.”

“That works for me.”

I paused for a brief second to clear my throat, but it wasn’t quick enough.

“Didn’t I tell you guys that Bruno is our guy? We know he killed Karina and Mike Pavlovich in Brighton Beach, which probably means he’s your perp in the Boston-area murders.”

“Tanner,” Carella said.

“What?”

“Shut the fuck up, will you?”

I winced a bit, knowing we’d be our worst enemy if we continued fighting like siblings, regardless of rank and role. Without knowing who was right or wrong, we had to share the facts.

“Guys, I didn’t follow the text trail. So I need Tanner to clearly state, without interruption, why he thinks Bruno is the killer. You’ve got thirty seconds. Go.”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

Despite his innocent look, Tanner had a thread of cockiness. Did it go hand in hand with his age?

“Not obvious to this agent. We just need the facts, and I’m certain we’ll see the same perspective,” I said.

I had my doubts, given the personalities of the group, but I had to end this counterproductive infighting so I could figure out what the hell was going on. Only then could I rally the troops, or mules in a few cases, to aggressively

pursue the next step of our investigation.

“Okay, for starters, we have confirmation that Bruno was at Tatiana.”

Nick smacked the table. “Crap, son. That should have been the lead.”

“Hold on,” Carella chimed in.

I wanted to hear Tanner out, but Carella’s tone altered my approach. “Go ahead, Carella.”

“Agent Munson was in charge of the interviews at Tatiana. After Alex was attacked, I asked him to have his team go back to the restaurant and show every person in there the picture of Bruno.”

“And they recognized him, right?” Tanner said with a hint of attitude.

“Yes, but—”

“So what’s all the pushback for?”

“Hold your breath, junior, for about twenty seconds.” Carella mumbled something I couldn’t understand. I glanced at Nick, who punched the mute button.

“I think he’s pissed.”

A quick head nod and I unmuted our line as Carella continued his thought.

“If you read all of Munson’s report, he said four different people recognized Bruno. But his most recent sighting at Tatiana had been at least three months prior.”

“Oh. Missed that part,” Tanner said with defeat in his voice.

I heard a few exasperated breaths.

I tried to keep us all on the same page. “So we’ve got some information clarified. Bruno might have known Karina, but it doesn’t appear that he was in the restaurant that night.”

“Doesn’t mean he wasn’t waiting for her after work,” Tanner added.

“True,” I said. “Right now, the only likely connection is between Karina and Mike. They went to the same high school. They’re only two years apart in age, so it’s very possible they could have run in the same circles.”

“Alex, I think the killer is sending a rather direct message. Stuffing body parts down Mike’s throat, including Karina’s tongue? It doesn’t take a nuclear physicist to figure it out,” Carella said.

Looking at Nick, I said, “A lovers’ triangle.”

“Did you get your MD in geometry?” Nick deadpanned.

My lips turned upward at the corners in response to Nick’s stupid joke, but I wasn’t really in a laughing mood. We weren’t making much progress with our conference call, and I was getting antsy.

I tried to rally the troops. “So, we need to find a connection between Bruno and the two Brighton Beach vics.”

Carella spoke up. “Munson said that Karina had a drug problem. That was verified by a number of her coworkers. It had gone on for a while, and they seemed tired of it. She’d lost custody of her three kids and was constantly borrowing money and giving excuses for being late to work.”

I quietly rapped my fingers on the table. "Priors?"

"A string of possession charges and one charge for prostitution."

"One more thing," he said. "The night she was killed, she left work early, rushing out of the restaurant. They'd seen her do that before, and it usually meant she either had a date with someone she thought could be her sugar daddy or she was meeting a dealer."

A thought had just entered my frontal lobe.

"Is there a possibility that Mike Pavlovich could have been her drug connection?"

I heard paper flapping over the speaker, maybe Carella thumbing through his tiny notepad. "No arrests for him, not even a traffic citation."

I nodded and let the information resonate.

"I think we need to wait until we can verify Bruno's whereabouts during the time Karina and Mike were killed," I said.

"Munson is on his way to the warehouse where Bruno worked on the north end of Brooklyn. We're hoping someone can give us a hint as to where he might have been between the hours that Karina and Mike were killed."

"And that was between nine p.m. and three a.m.?"

Brad spoke up. "That's what the ME report says."

"Hold on, we might have something here to help us," Gretchen said.

I could hear her and Brad conversing, but not arguing. In fact, I knew arguing was the last thing she wanted to do with Brad.

"You have an attentive audience, Gretchen. Fire away," I said.

"I've been working with the New York Transit Authority for the last four hours, and they've been nice enough to provide me video footage of the area near Tatiana on the night Karina was killed and then again last night."

My mouth became dry, and I licked my lips. "And?"

"I'm almost certain that I've got footage of Bruno getting out of a cab at the corner of Bridgewater and Brighton 3rd Street. He walked behind a light pole, but you can just make him out. He has his hoodie down, and I see his dog tags glaring from the light just above for a split second."

"Brad, what do you think?" Nick asked.

"I'm with Gretchen. Appears to be him, or someone who's trying to look like him. We already have a call into the cab company to talk to the driver."

"What time?" My mouth was now a foot above the phone.

"The footage shows ten fifty-two p.m."

"Ten fifty-two," I repeated, closing my eyes. "Wait a second...which night?"

"Sorry, last night. Not even twelve hours ago."

Nick and I locked eyes, and I could feel my heart tick a bit faster. "So he takes a cab with the purpose of attacking me." I blew out a breath. "Wish we had—"

"I think we might, but in a different way," Gretchen said. "Based upon my review of the video footage from the previous night, on the same corner,

and from five other camera positions east and west of that location, I didn't see anyone matching Bruno's appearance. Not even close."

"Doesn't mean he couldn't have slipped through. Hell, he could have walked up the Boardwalk from half a mile away," Tanner said.

"You're right, Tanner. But it's still nice work, Gretchen," I said. "Now we need the records from all the cab companies that drive through Brighton Beach."

"Already made the request," Brad said.

I didn't want to pick teams, but I was awfully proud of the commitment from my Boston colleagues.

"Cool."

"Holy shit. Alex, just got a text from Munson," Carella said, his voice pitching a shade higher.

"Bruno's boss and one other guy confirmed that they were shooting pool with him the night of the murders, well past midnight, from what he says. He'll get verification from those at the pub, but this is big. Bruno might be innocent of the Brighton Beach murders after all."

My pulse was chugging even faster now. "If he didn't kill the two in Brooklyn—hell, he was playing pool with his buddies the night before last—I'd be hard-pressed to imagine him killing the pair up in Boston."

"Our job just got harder," Nick declared, pushing his sleeves up his arm.

Staring at Nick, I forgot about the others on the phone for a second. "So, again, I'm wondering what his motivation was for trying to whack me?"

"He must know the killer," Carella said.

Nick held up a finger. "Semper Fi. Those were his last words during the on-site interview."

"Always faithful. He must be covering for someone." I paused, my eyes shifting to our backyard. "I think I know our next move," I said to Nick.

"Everyone else, please follow up on your leads, the cab companies, the weapon used in each crime, and anything else that will put things in the black or white categories. By the way, thank you for working your asses off while the rest of America was sleeping. Much appreciated. I think it will pay off."

Nick punched the line dead, then leaned over and patted me on the back. "Nice work, Dr. Alex."

I smacked my hands together. "All it took was some old-fashioned communication. TIAWIFH."

"And that means?"

"There is a way in fucking hell."

Nick slipped into the front seat and slammed the door, rubbing his hands together and then holding them in front of the rented car's heating vents.

"Damn, it's cold out there."

Nick's cherry red nose and cheeks were ample evidence that the temperatures had dropped since we landed at Williamsport Airport—our second visit to northeastern Pennsylvania in the last three days.

"That's what happens when you stand outside for fifteen minutes."

"I tried to be professional, but you woulda thought I was a street crossing guard when I flashed my FBI creds. Needless to say, around these parts, they don't carry much weight."

"I think the highway patrol officer is acting like a street crossing guard, given our road is blocked in the middle of Pennsylvania BFE. He's not letting us through," I said, my eyes glued to my phone trying to decipher a new email from Brad.

Lifting my head for a moment, I gave Nick a wry smile.

"Little shit. About froze my ass off out there."

"So what's the big holdup, besides the obvious?" Peering past five cars lined up in front of our four-door tin can, I saw the hind legs of a deer sprawled across the pavement.

"First I had to wait until he finally stopped chatting with the animal control guy. Apparently, they're big hunting buddies, and they were planning their next trip."

A car horn blared from behind us. Nick checked the rearview, and I glanced over my shoulder to make sure a frustrated driver wasn't going to exit the car and execute a new, more personal form of road rage.

I blew out a frustrated breath. We were only ten minutes away from the US Penitentiary, and up to now, I'd been able to keep my emotions in check. I'd come to the conclusion that we needed to have a second and, hopefully, final interview with J. L. Cobb. During our last visit, he'd hinted of another person being involved in the ring killings—a woman. But he still hadn't gone to trial, so it was entirely possible—bordering on likely—that Cobb, or even his attorney, were setting up several other plausible theories to shift a potential jury away from "beyond reasonable doubt."

But what if there was another person involved? The possibility kept rolling through my mind. Frankly, I didn't want to think about the chance that someone else connected to Mark's murder might be walking the streets killing more people.

"They won't let us go around?"

"Doesn't follow state highway procedure," Nick said, using air quotes with his fingers.

“Did you tell Farmer Brown that we have an urgent need to be at the penitentiary?”

Nick slowly turned his head in my direction, rolling his eyes. “He said everyone in this area is in a rush saying they’ve got to get to the pen for something. Everyone, he said, throws around the term ‘life or death’ like it’s a parking ticket. He said it means nothing to him.”

I could feel my jaw clench tighter, and I gripped the door handle.

“Alex, you’ll just get your blood pressure up. They’ll clean up the carcass and let us through no sooner than their own timetable.”

“I don’t have high blood pressure.”

“I know that. I’m just sayin’.”

As if someone had flipped the switch in the gray clouds overhead, a bevy of snowflakes descended from the sky.

I sighed. “Winter. It never ends.”

“Kind of like that relative who comes over for Thanksgiving, but ends up staying all the way until Christmas. And toward the end, he forgets he’s in someone else’s home and he starts walking around in his underwear, belching and farting whenever he wants, even if guests have come over.”

I showed my teeth.

“Yes, it was that painful,” Nick said.

“Seriously? I thought you were just spinning a tale to pass time?”

He shook his head. “Just be glad you don’t have an Uncle George.”

I lost myself for a quick second in the white flakes, unsure if either of my parents had siblings. I’d only had a couple of brief conversations with my father since I woke up from my crash coma a couple of months back. And they had been rather superficial conversations at that. In fact, he’d slurred every fifth word, which made me think he’d been drinking—and it was ten in the morning.

“Is he really that bad?”

“Four of the last five years.”

“Ughh.”

“The only reason it wasn’t a perfect five-for-five was because two years ago he took a cruise with a new lady friend. It gave Antonio and me hope that we’d finally broken the cycle with Uncle George.”

“Didn’t work?”

“Hell no. He actually called us every day during the holidays, saying he missed us and vowing to never skip another holiday season in our home.”

I forced out a smile as I gazed out the windshield. “I guess I shouldn’t complain about the weather.”

“Eh,” he said with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

After a few seconds of watching the snow build on the wiper blades, we slowly turned our heads and glared at each other until he broke the stoic standoff. “The long winters up here suck. Even being a New Yorker, I have to admit it.”

“Admitting it is the first step.” Mid-chuckle, my phone buzzed and beeped.

“What’s up, Brad?” I put him on speakerphone.

“Oh, glad we caught you. I thought you’d be in the middle of your interview with Cobb by now.”

“Sidetracked.”

“More like deer-tracked,” Nick said.

“Huh?” he asked.

“We’re in a standstill on Highway 15. Car slammed into a deer, so we’re just watching it snow for the hundredth time this winter.”

“Winter sucks.” A pinched woman’s voice.

“Gretchen?”

“Yeah, she’s on,” Brad said. “Long night last night juggling a ton of other investigations, but we’ve made good progress.”

“Practically tied at the hip, Alex,” Gretchen said.

I could see her smile through the phone, and I smirked at Nick.

“I have to admit, the rash of homicides on top of our current caseload caught us off guard. We haven’t been quite as responsive as we normally are,” Brad said.

“It happens, but thanks for taking accountability.”

“Look, I know you guys are in Lewisburg to try to figure out if there’s any truth to Cobb’s hint of having a female accomplice.”

“Right.”

“Well, Gretchen finally had some time to dig into those Rod Stewart lyrics.”

“The ones Cobb started to sing last time we interviewed him,” I said.

Ha-chew!

“Sorry, I might be getting a little cold,” Gretchen said.

I mouthed, *Winter sucks*, to Nick, then said out loud, “Working these crazy hours doesn’t help.”

“I’m good. Anyway, I read through the lyrics about a dozen times. I tried to look at them from Cobb’s perspective—his life, the Asperger’s he’s been dealing with, and yes, as a murderer.”

“And?” Nick said.

Without saying a word, I waved my arm so Nick would see that traffic was finally moving. He threw the car into drive and we headed south on the highway. As we passed the patrol officer, Nick even gave him a friendly wave.

Ha-chew!

“Bless you, Gretchen.”

“Ugh. After this call, I’m going straight to the grocery store to pick up every kind of cold medicine I can find.”

Her high-pitched voice now squealed like Minnie Mouse.

“Make sure you turn in your receipts to Jerry on an expense report,” I

said.

“You think he’d pay?”

“He should. It’s hazard pay.”

She tried to giggle, but her nose honked instead. “How embarrassing,” she said.

Smiling at Nick, I said, “It’s fine, Gretchen. I’m interested in your research. The ‘Maggie May’ lyrics.”

“Tissue?” I heard Brad say.

Three obnoxious snorts, and the phone nearly rattled in my hand. “That’s a little better,” she said.

Nick took the Ziegler Road exit, and we turned west, moving away from the West Branch Susquehanna River, although the windblown snow angled against our car, reducing our visibility. We were close to the penitentiary.

“It was obvious to me that the lyrics were about a guy and girl, but no real theme hit home for me. Nothing that made sense in relation to Cobb. Not until I found an interview Rod Stewart gave about the story behind the song.”

Another pause. The blowing snorts were shorter this time. Then I heard a deep inhale. Apparently, her nasal passages were completely blocked. I’m sure she wasn’t thrilled to share some of her grossest moments with Brad, the object of her affection. I felt for her.

“Okay. The interview brought it all home for me.”

“How so?” Nick asked, his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel.

I thought I heard a giggle. “What’s up, Gretchen?”

“Stewart said the song was based on a true story from his own life.” She cleared her throat. “He met a lady at the Beaulieu Jazz Festival and she...uh, took his virginity.”

“Ha!” Nick called out. “Seriously? I had no idea.”

“Most people don’t. In fact, it was sheer luck that the song ended up on his 1971 album named—”

“*Every Picture Tells a Story*. I have it on vinyl,” Nick said.

“That’s a humble brag,” I said.

Gretchen pushed ahead. “His record label almost didn’t put it on the album. He and a partner had written the lyrics, but there was no music for the song. Finally, it got done, but it was originally on the B side of another song.”

“The forty-five,” Nick said.

“I feel like we’re getting a history lesson,” Brad said, adding, “in ancient history.”

“Is he saying we’re old?” Nick said.

“He’s saying *you’re* old.” I raised an eyebrow.

“So...” Gretchen regained our attention. “I think Cobb was singing the song because it was about the woman who was his first.”

“Interesting. Do we know if he has any Maggie Mays in his life?”

“Actually, the full name, Maggie May, is never mentioned in the song. Stewart borrowed the song’s title from an old Liverpool folk song about a

Lime Street prostitute.”

I watched Nick execute another turn, this one onto Heartbreak Ridge Road.

“Wow, Gretchen. Helluva job. Thanks. Now that I think about it, I’m not sure I recall his case file having any information about a female in his life.”

“It’s blank. No mentions of anyone named Maggie, nothing about a wife, no girlfriend at any age. I even checked in with the office of the assistant US Attorney, and they confirmed it. No women.”

The wheels of the car slipped just a tad as Nick turned left onto Big House Circle.

“So, we’re back where we started.”

“What do you mean, Alex?” Brad asked.

“Out of nowhere, Cobb mentions that someone else was along for the ride. A woman. Then he whistles this tune, sings a few lines. We run off, do this research, review his case file. Here we are pulling up to the gate, and I’m wondering if this is nothing more than a game to him. He knows about the murders we’re investigating, at least the first two. Being incarcerated, maybe for the rest of his life, he could easily get his jollies by toying with us like puppets.”

“You think he knew that we’d be coming back to interview him?” Nick said, a single trench forming between his eyes.

“He’s brilliant in ways we can’t imagine, Nick.”

My partner pulled up to the front gate, and we watched a guard trudge through snow toward our car. “Should we just turn around and head back to Boston?” Nick asked.

My eyes looked through the snow and studied the prison’s ominous façade, wondering what J. L. Cobb was thinking at that exact moment.

Then, a knock on Nick’s window.

“Alex, go or stay?” he asked.

“Stay.”

The moment the interview door opened, I could see this wasn’t the same guy we’d spoken to just three days earlier. He walked with a noticeable limp, his arm was in a cast, and his face was so beaten and bruised that I could barely see the whites of his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I only asked to let him think I cared. Or did I actually feel some compassion for him, given his battered state?

“Yeah,” he said in a solemn tone.

Cobb sat in the scarred metal chair as the same two guards from our last visit chained him to the metal pole. The guards moved to their positions, one by the door, the other at the opposite end of the room. Unlike our prior interview, Cobb didn’t fidget, and he didn’t mumble indecipherable messages. He wasn’t rocking back and forth to the point where I could almost feel his

brain buzzing with activity. He just stared at the wall, his injured face in a daze.

I walked over to the guard and asked, “Is he on any medication?”

“Nope. Even refused ibuprofen for his broken arm,” he said.

“How did he break it?”

He pursed his lips and shifted his sight from me. “Said he fell. That’s all I know.”

I turned and locked eyes with Nick. We were both aware of the pervasive abuse throughout the prison system—corruption, drugs, violence, you name it. Typically, the inmates who’d yet to be convicted were protected from the rest of the population. Federal prison, though, provided more opportunities for inmates to come along—convicted felons with those who had only been charged with a crime.

Nick and I exchanged no words, but I felt positive we were both thinking the same thing: the guards had allowed Cobb to be abused. Either they had been paid off through any number of methods, or they simply agreed with the inmates’ fucked-up method for dealing out justice and turned a blind eye. He’d violated their skewed code of conduct. Cobb’s actions in the free world deserved punishment behind bars.

Up until I’d met him, I would have probably led the charge to beat the crap out of him. I’d lost someone because of him. My kids had too.

But now, after seeing how he’d regressed into something resembling a mute, my vengeful fury had subsided, replaced not by indifference but disgust. Disgust at the system more than any one person.

I slipped off my suit coat and draped it over my chair, then anchored my arms on the back of the chair, eyeing him. He couldn’t be playing us, could he? The warden didn’t have a Hollywood makeup artist and set director working with the inmates to create a scene straight out of *The Shawshank Redemption*. The injuries were real.

But so were the murders we had to solve—the number increasing on a daily basis. With Bruno Chappaletti no longer a primary suspect, our best hope was to get Cobb to open up about the ring murders. Before we left Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, we had to know if he had an accomplice. It was that simple.

Yet I knew it would be anything but.

“J. L., Agent Radowski and I are interested in learning more about your life.”

He didn’t budge or blink his eyes.

I continued. “Who are your friends? What did you do for fun?”

Seconds ticked by, and then he finally blinked. But he said nothing. His lips didn’t move. I inhaled and thought about another tack.

Walking to my left so I could see more than just his profile, my heels clipped to a stop about eight feet away from him. He had shades of blue around his eyes, mixed with other bruising that had a purple hue.

“Do you have a friend named Bruno?”

He didn’t flinch. Nothing. He just stared. Not defiantly, but more like he didn’t care. About anyone.

“So you don’t know anyone named Bruno?” I asked with a slight edge to my voice. “How about a girl? Do you have any friends who are girls?”

I waited a few seconds, but he acted like I wasn’t there. “The last time we were here, you mentioned another person, a woman, who worked with you while you took care of your business. What’s her name, J. L.?”

Still no response. I looked at Nick, who shook his head, pressing his lips against his teeth. I could see he thought Cobb was a lost cause.

I wasn’t close to giving up.

“J. L., have you been wanting to get your hands on a packet of pepper?”

His eyes shifted for a split second, then back to their set position of looking at the wall or whatever images danced in his mind.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Nick shift in his seat, his elbows on his knees.

“J. L.,” he said. “How many people are you willing to let die? Five? Ten? A hundred? If you could swing it with your legion of killers in the field, would you like to see some type of genocide?”

Cobb swallowed, then slowly turned his torso, his neck apparently stiff. He looked at the ground, but his eyes blinked several times, as if a switch had flipped on his brain. His lips parted, then they closed again.

I traded a quick glance with Nick, glad that he’d poked the bear, but now hoping he’d let Cobb come around on his own.

The silent room was interrupted by a single, sharp cough from the guard at the other end of the room. I looked at him, wondering if he was sending some type of signal to Cobb. A form of intimidation possibly? Was he concerned that Cobb might implicate those who’d beaten him? And if he did share that information, was the guard fearful that he might be included in the group?

“The attorney showed up yesterday.”

Cobb spoke. I released a breath. Now, we had to keep him talking.

“What’s your attorney’s name?”

His eyes looked up and met mine for an instant. Looking to the corner, he said, “It wasn’t my attorney.”

“Whose attorney was it?”

“Feds.”

I tried to keep my expression blank, but it caught me off guard.

“Assistant US Attorney Kasha Timmons?”

He nodded stiffly, then shifted in his seat and he winced.

I crossed my arms and bit the inside of my cheek, pissed as hell that her office wouldn’t have shared that information with us. “What did you guys discuss?”

He ran a fingernail down his cast, then back up, his eyes studying the

path. "Same questions you're asking me."

"And what did you share with her?"

"Nothing."

I looked at Nick and realized maybe this had been a waste of time. One that could have been avoided had we'd been afforded the tiniest bit of professional courtesy. We were all on the same side, weren't we? Then again, Timmons was a lawyer.

"Nothing," I repeated to myself, my eyes locking on the floor. I could hear air stream through my nostrils. I took in a breath, frustrated that Cobb wouldn't open up or that maybe there was actually nothing to share.

A phlegmy sound, and I held my breath.

Lifting my vision, I saw Cobb sitting on the edge of his seat, seething and panting as tears welled in his eyes.

"I...I was," he gasped, his chest expanding more with each breath.

I leaned forward. Nick rose from his chair. I even noticed the head of the guard at the opposite end of the room turn to look directly at Cobb.

Without warning, Cobb screamed at the top of his lungs. The parts of his face not bruised glowed red, and veins bulged from his neck.

"J. L., what is it you want to say?"

He kept rocking and panting as tears streamed down his face.

The guard moved toward Cobb with a hand on his billy club. I put up my hand like a stop sign, and the guard halted his position. He narrowed his eyes at me, and I got the distinct feeling he wanted to use his weapon on me.

It wasn't going to happen.

I turned and faced Cobb. Turning down my volume and intensity, I said, "J. L., tell us what you're upset about."

His panting continued for another ten seconds, and then it began to dissipate. He looked around the room, then found my eyes and glared at me.

"Two nights ago, I was raped." He swallowed back more tears, his breathing still labored.

I closed my eyes for a second.

"With a broomstick," he said as his jaw muscles flinched.

"Dear God," Nick said, bringing a fist to his mouth.

I wasn't sure what to say. I couldn't bring myself to say that I was sorry.

"Tell me more, J. L."

He tried wiping his face, but he winced and stopped. The bruising must have been too severe. "It's just like when I was younger."

"Younger? What happened?"

"I was teased, beaten up for being different. And there was this one time..." His voice trailed off, his eyes going distant.

"Do you want to tell us?"

His breath quivered, and then he continued. "I was walking across this field behind my elementary school. It was a Sunday. I was actually walking to a friend's house. I looked up at the school and saw two kids trying to break in.

They ran after me, chased me down just as I entered the path in the woods. That was the only way I knew how to get away. And they caught me there, with nothing but tall trees surrounding us.”

He swallowed and took in another shaky breath, then he lifted his eyes. I nodded.

“They were twice my size. One kid had a tattoo on his neck that read *Fuck You*.”

I could feel my pulse thumping in my own neck, but I remained steady, holding my gaze on Cobb.

“The assholes took turns holding me, and the other one would punch me. One of them had this ring. It looked like a class ring.” Cobb held up his good hand and curled it into a tight fist. “He turned it around, let me look at it, then he used it as a weapon and punched my face twenty-three straight times. Blood splattered all over everything. My blood. And all they did was laugh and go at me harder.”

Quiet engulfed the room for what seemed like an hour. It must have been closer to a minute. I wondered if there was more, hoping there wasn’t.

“After I collapsed, one guy was ready to leave. He kicked my face a couple of times and started to take off. But the other guy, the guy with the ring, started laughing. It was this evil laugh. He wouldn’t stop.”

Cobb looked up, more tears pooling. “And...and...”

“You don’t have to—”

“Yes, yes,” he cried out. “I have to tell you. He fucking raped me. He raped a ten-year-old kid.” He started bawling, his head bouncing up and down.

“Holy shit,” Nick said.

A minute passed, and Cobb regained control of his emotions.

“Why did you want to share that with us?”

He rocked his head back and tried to look at the ceiling, then he looked straight at me. “Because I killed your husband. I’m a monster. And I think you should know how I became this person.”

All liquid left my mouth. I was parched, unsure how to think, what to say. I ran my fingers through my hair, and I could feel my hand shaking. It finally found my pocket.

“Okay,” I said.

He started shaking his head. “Going through all of this shit, reliving the nightmares of my childhood...”

“Yes?”

He licked his lips, glanced away for a second, then looked back at me. “Even with all that crap from my past, I wouldn’t be here right now if I hadn’t met...her.”

My breath caught in my throat, and I almost coughed up saliva. “Tell us, J. L. Tell us about her.”

I found my chair, sat down, and crossed my legs. Cobb dried up, the

veins in his neck less prominent.

“She was my Maggie May.” He began to nod, his eyes studying the gray lines in the linoleum, as if he was replaying a series of pictures from his past.

“She was the best.”

I noticed his use of the past tense. “How so?”

His lips turned upward for a split second. “We just did everything together.”

“Yeah?”

“Went fishing together, took walks on the beach.”

It sounded all too normal. I wondered if it was.

He leaned back in his chair. “We took this one trip down to DC. Went to all these cool museums, the Capitol, the monuments, the Supreme Court even.”

I took in a breath. He sounded like a regular guy describing a normal event between him and his so-called Maggie May. I began to feel my air passages close, knowing I’d never again make any memories with Mark. And here I was in a casual conversation with Mark’s killer. It seemed surreal, as if another Alex had taken over my body temporarily to placate Cobb, make him think I cared. I told myself I couldn’t relax. If I did, I might lash out. And then we’d never earn his trust so that he’d share the name of his accomplice.

“The coolest tour was at the Pentagon. A city within a city,” he said, lifting his eyes. I nodded, ensuring him I was still engaged.

“She taught me a lot too.”

“Like what?”

“Things I needed help with at first, like how to talk to a customer service person and ask for a refund.”

“That’s helpful.”

“Then, you know, we would trade off.”

He looked down, as if he was pondering whether to continue. Now that he was calmer, I wondered if he was questioning his decision to open up.

I tried to keep the conversation flowing. “A trade, huh? I hope it was fair.”

“Eh. At first it was. I think it was.”

“So, what skill did you share?”

His dark eyes grew wide for a moment, then he sat up straighter. “Mainly my grasp of numbers. She could ask me anything, and I could usually figure it out in my head.”

“Impressive.”

“It kind of comes naturally. Never had to study.”

“What did she teach you?”

His eyes found mine, and he paused with his mouth open.

I tilted my head a tad, hoping he’d see I was still eager to hear more.

“She taught me how to shoot a rifle.”

A bomb exploded in my gut, thinking back to the day when Nick and I

were pinned against the front of the museum as some invisible sniper tried to kill us.

“J. L., was that you that day at the museum?”

He took in a breath and pushed it out through his nose. “I can keep a secret. I’ve learned how to do that. I know it’s important to trust your partner. It is. It really is.”

“You’re right, J. L.”

Shaking his head, he ran his fingers through his hair, then grabbed a fistful and tugged until he screamed again. “Dammit! I can’t do this. I can’t keep telling lies about my life. Who I am. What I became. How I got here.”

“And so...?”

“She fucking did it. She knew you were at the museum. And she tried to kill you.”

“Was that part of your plan?”

He pointed at his chest. “My plan?” His voice pitched higher. “I only gave her intel, as she called it. It was *her* plan. The whole fucking thing was her plan.”

Part of me wondered if there was any way he was putting on the performance of his life. Because if he was nothing more than a pawn, it could help his cause, possibly reduce his sentence. I only wanted the truth. For my sanity, and to stop this person from killing again.

“So you’re telling me that she came up with the idea to drown the victims in the bay waters?”

“Mostly. I showed her this cool fishing place at Choate Island.”

The place where the first body was discovered.

“And it just kind of happened. But the real question is why.”

“I’m game. Tell me why.”

“Because she suffered something god-awful when she was in the military. She convinced me it was the right thing to do. To bring justice to the world where there wasn’t any.”

I could see Nick fidgeting in my peripheral vision. I knew he wanted a name. I wanted a name. The information we’d learned was gold, but we couldn’t claim victory until we had the fucking name.

“So, your Maggie May was interested in bringing justice to the people who hurt her?”

He curled his lip in, his mind possibly processing how he’d ended up in prison while his Maggie May still walked the streets, a free woman.

“As I look back, it’s all kind of strange, how our relationship turned from this pretty cool thing into something...different.”

“How so?”

He played with a frayed edge of his cast. “I think she might have been using me. As much as I’ve wanted to think I’m normal and that I deserve to have a girlfriend, any real friend, like any other normal guy, I felt deep down that it was more of a dream. Not the real me. So, I guess all along I knew she

was using me. But I couldn't get my conscious self to admit it."

Turning my head slightly, Nick gave me the signal—as in, we couldn't keep playing the role of a shrink. Cobb might think he had ten sessions before he eventually shared the name. Nick's concern was legitimate, but this was a balancing act. We weren't exactly dealing with a stable person.

"Tell me more about this justice that..." I purposely didn't finish my thought, hoping he would.

"Maggie May."

It didn't work. "Yeah, your Maggie May. I'm curious why she didn't want to focus on the people who hurt her when she was in the Army." I was only guessing about the military branch, trying to draw out more information. It worked.

"It wasn't in the Army. She was a Marine. Semper Fi and all the bullshit."

A Marine. Just like Bruno Chappaletti.

"Anyway, she convinced me that she'd gotten her retribution against the people that hurt her in the Marines."

I was confused. "Then what was this justice cause really all about?"

"In her job, she came across a lot of cheesy assholes who thought they were smarter than everyone, especially their significant others."

He was talking about Mark and me, not specifically, but mixed in with that group. My legs and arms felt a tingle from a rush of adrenaline.

"She was really bothered by their lack of integrity and loyalty."

"And what did you think?"

He swallowed once, possibly holding back some emotion, then he looked me in the eyes. "She told me that she loved me. That we'd always share a bond."

"You feel betrayed?"

"Fuck yeah! She said if I followed her guidance, we'd always be together. It was all about loyalty, so she said."

I paused a moment, hoping the ebb of his emotional upswing would subside. A minute later, he had returned to playing with his cast.

"The cheesy assholes she came across. How did she decide who she would...you know?" It was still difficult for me to act like I was nothing more than an observer of this horrific string of murders. I felt like I'd been gutted by a thousand knives, all at the same time.

"Well, that's where she needed my help. She knew these guys would bring one bimbo after another to a couple of different motels. She wanted to find out who the top offenders were." He cleared his throat and sat up in his chair.

"She asked you to hack into the motel reservation system, like you mentioned in our last visit."

"You got it. There are probably better computer hackers out there; I just haven't met them."

The edges of his mouth turned upward for a split second.

“And what did you find?”

I wasn't sure I wanted to hear this, but it was the only way to not only learn Maggie May's name, but also her motive for killing the last four people. Or had she killed them? Maybe she'd found another patsy.

“Damn, that list was longer than Santa's,” he said, shifting his eyes around the room, finding Nick for a moment. “I remember showing it to Maggie May. It was like Christmas morning for her. She was ecstatic.”

“Why?”

“Looking back, I think it gave her some type of warped sense of duty to hunt down the worst offenders, get intel on their lives, and exact justice on behalf of their wives.”

Bile tickled the back of my throat. I wasn't sure I could sit here calmly and listen to this. But I had no other option. I swallowed and maintained a composed demeanor on the outside.

“How many were on her so-called Christmas list?”

“There were dozens to choose from. But we didn't just pick people randomly. She used my computer skills to get information on all of them. And then we created a top ten list.”

I nodded. I wondered where Mark sat on that list. Third, I would assume. I could feel my entire body tense up like petrified wood. And then I wondered about Monty, Ben Murphy, and the pair from Brighton Beach. Where did they fall on the list?

“J. L., we need to know if you think Maggie May could still be out there killing.”

He bit his lip until he finally drew blood. His head trembled.

“I think it's her life's mission.”

“From that list, do you recall anyone named Monty or Ben Murphy?”

He lifted his eyes. “Monty, hmm. He wasn't on the list, but there was a guy with that name who owned a bar I went to. Part of our intel effort. But Ben Murphy was her boss.”

I jerked my head right and locked eyes with Nick. Murphy was the state police lieutenant.

I knew I had to turn back the clock one more time, to get the name and to finally understand how this all went down. “The night Nick and I found you in your home, the woman in there. She was a state police patrol officer. In the report she said she'd pulled you over, found blood, and then you pulled her pistol and kidnapped her.”

“That's what she said, yes.”

Was he going to make me beg for the information? Shit!

“J. L., there's a distinct possibility that Maggie May has continued killing people. You now understand how she used you. You can help stop the killing, J. L. Just give us her name.”

He took in a huge gulp of air. “I wish like hell I wasn't in this position. I

hate it.”

“You hate being disloyal?”

He nodded.

I leaned in closer. “But this has nothing to do with loyalty, and you know that. You never thought you’d kill anyone, right?”

“I never wanted to hurt anyone. Never thought about it...until I met her.”

“So tell us. Please.”

More tears pooled in his eyes and I could see perspiration beading on his forehead. “It’s...”

“Yes?”

“You’re right. It was the woman you found in my house. Margaret Turov. She’s my Maggie May.”

Nick smacked his hand on his leg.

Waving my hand, I kept Cobb’s attention on me. “Do you know why Margaret would want to kill people not on her infidelity Christmas list?”

“Because she’s sick and demented, that’s why.”

From everything I’d heard during the last hour, Cobb had essentially been brainwashed. I’d read about similar stories, some dating back to my initial FBI training in Quantico.

“Can I go now? I’m tired, and I just want to be alone.”

The guards untethered him from the wall and took him to the door. I could hear Cobb mumbling.

“Do you have anything else you want to tell us?” I asked as he waited for the guards to unlock the door.

He broke out in song.

You led me away from home

Just to save you from being alone

You stole my soul, and that’s a pain I can do without.

He was obsessing over the tune. He probably couldn’t help himself. Anything to remain sane.

“Thank you for sharing this information, J. L. We’ll tell Kasha Timmons everything you told us. This will help your case.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not sure I’ll live another three days in this place.”

And then he was whisked away.

A blanket of haze hugged the stained ceiling, swaying like waves in an ocean. The woman brought a hand to her nose, stopping mid-breath. The pungent odor of obnoxious perfumes, sweet aftershave, and alcohol mixed with the smoke to halt the pangs of hunger she'd been feeling the last several hours. But with her newly acquired information, she knew she couldn't risk taking the time to sit down and eat a three-course meal anyway. Too much to accomplish.

She recalled a quote that had been drilled into her psyche in her former life. "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit." The famous General Truman quote must have been told to her—no, yelled at her—at least a thousand times.

And it was all bullshit. With her determination on top of her skill set, there wasn't anything she couldn't accomplish. Most importantly, when the time came, she would gladly accept all the credit she rightly deserved. But it was more than that. It was about being accountable for her actions. And she had no problem with the concept. In fact, she could hardly contain herself, waiting for the day to arrive when she would stand tall and shout to the world about what she'd achieved—not just for her, but for the betterment of society.

She flipped her straight locks of scarlet hair behind her back. Her eyes hidden behind a pair of octagonal, purple-rimmed glasses, she noticed the rainbow-colored, swirling carpet design. She wondered how it didn't give the patrons of the Atlantic City casino vertigo or, worse yet, make them hurl.

Lifting her sights while taking in another dose of the foul air, she spotted a large contingent of Asian people huddled around three tables in the corner, and she instantly pictured herself in a seedy casino during one particular stopover in Manila a few years back.

She was there with her comrades. Always faithful, she reminded herself. All except a few who had to prove a point. And then, to show she was a bigger badass than anyone else, she had to one-up them. She had stifled the pain all these years. At times, the ping of emotion would sit at the edge of her conscious self, ready to consume her soul. But she'd become a professional in the art of suppression.

That incident was part of what made her who she was. Or who she'd become. Mostly. There were other times.

"Would the lady like a flute of champagne?"

The woman turned and spotted a squatty man with a drop of perspiration sliding down his extra-long sideburns, holding a tray of glasses filled with golden bubbly. She wondered if he'd failed at the Elvis thing and had been forced to carry a tray around all day.

"Not interested." She scanned the expansive room and finally found the

cluster of tables dedicated to the craft of blackjack. She sauntered that way, but her heel caught a snag on the carpet, and she tumbled forward. Avoiding the man with the tray, she let go of her clutch and dropped to the carpet, landing on her elbows as her red hair dropped across her vision.

Before she could breathe, three men were trying to help her up. She spotted her purse a foot away and felt her heart skip a beat when she noticed the curved grip of her knife peeking out. Still on the ground, she purposely pushed her knee up and snagged her sleeveless dress on the floor, which brought it down far enough to create a wave of cleavage. Like trained dogs, every male eye swung to her chest, giving her a brief moment to scoop up her clutch while bagging her knife in one smooth motion.

"I don't know what happened," she said, trying to shovel the prickly hair out of her face. "How embarrassing." She released a forced giggle.

"Are you hurt? Would you like to sit at my table?" one man asked.

The guy was actually wearing sunglasses inside the building, fake rhinestones on every pocket of his cheesy outfit. What a tool.

"I'm fine, thank you."

She pried their pawing hands off her arms and continued her jaunt until the waiter poked her bare shoulder.

"Man, I think your tat is the coolest. But I can't quite see it all. Do you mind—"

She turned to face him, shifting her hair over the image. "Actually, I do mind." She narrowed her eyes.

"What's the big deal?" he said, cinching up his pants.

Clenching her jaw, she considered what she could do to this nosy prick. "You're offensive to me in every way possible. Keep to yourself, before one day someone doesn't give you a second chance."

He didn't move for a couple of seconds. She tapped his cheek twice, then walked off, her eyes back to searching for "*The man with the plan. Visit Frank Sham Auto Group, and you'll be thankful you did.*" The old advertisement stuck in her mind, and it made her want him even more.

She walked past a craps table where a cluster of people whooped and hollered. "Come on, baby, sing the sweet music to me. You can do it, just one more time, baby." A middle-aged man, his shirt half-untucked and his eyes on fire, blew a puff of breath at the dice and then chucked the pair down to the other end of the table. It was as if a vacuum had sucked all the noise away, and then she heard a cascade of gasps.

The dice had finally stopped rolling. It took an extra second for the pea-brains to process the number of black dots, and then a thunderous roar.

"Bull's-eye!" the desperate man screamed, hoisting two fists in triumph, or possibly relief. "Johnny lives to fight and win another day, baby."

Rolling her eyes, she knew Johnny was on a high. He was an absolute rock star, or so he thought. She could recall being in that position a couple of moments in her life. A shallow, meaningless existence.

While she used to seethe at the events that had led her down this path, she knew it was all meant to be. All part of the plan for Margaret Turov. Her experiences defined her destiny, and for that, she was thankful. A calling to make the world a better place. Revenge was nothing more than a side benefit. But it couldn't go unnoticed. The feeling of ecstasy she'd felt when slashing and slicing had supplanted every other positive human experience she could recall—even during her special assignments when she was known as MT.

Just as she turned away from the raucous craps table, she heard Frank Sham's unmistakable howling laughter. Her body responded in a strange way. Revolted, her stomach turned upside down. But she also broke out in goose bumps in anticipation of what lay ahead.

Pulling up to the blackjack table, Margaret spotted Frank's comb-over right away. And his polyester blue leisure suit. Without a free chair to sit in, she stood behind a row of onlookers, fingering the curved edges of what had grown to be her most beloved tool. A weapon with immense precision. A weapon that brought fear to the eyes of her victims. Without fail, the moment the shining blade caught their eyes, she could practically see their hearts explode right in front of her. And then she would go to work, almost like a master chef or, better yet, a sculptor who depicts a scene befitting of that victim's most egregious sins.

Another quick image of Mike's expression shot through her frontal lobe just before she sliced off his manhood—the ultimate feeling of power and control. She shuddered for a brief second, then caught her breath in her throat and maintained her composure. She admitted that Mike's death was deeply personal. He'd destroyed her innocence and her belief that most men, at their core, were good people. Frank, on the other hand, was more of a blight on society. The way he manipulated and lied to every customer who walked into the doors of his used car dealership.

She could still recall the day she thumbed a ride from an inner city homeless shelter out to Frank's dealership. Back from her tour only a few months, the economy was in the pisser, and soon she'd found herself asking for handouts, which quickly led to a permanent stay in the shelter. A month later, she finally landed a job, but since it was a pizza delivery position, it required that she have a car.

It was autumn, and the orange leaves swirled into mini twisters, dancing off car hoods and across the parking lot. One spiraling gust of wind engulfed Frank, whose threadlike hair lifted, revealing a skull with a litany of blue veins splintering across his white head. She remembered him licking his hand—a scaly tongue that didn't seem human—and then wetting down his hair until the slime had glued his hair to his scalp.

Then he tried to shake her hand. She avoided that first overture. But not his last.

Looking around at the prices written in shoe polish on the front windshields in the lot, Margaret ran her fingers through her thick, short mane

and let out an exasperated, defeated breath. No way in hell she could afford a car, even a dented Ford that had over two hundred thousand miles on it.

After hearing her sob story, he held up a hairy finger and declared, “No one leaves Frank Sham’s Auto Group without the deal of a lifetime.”

“But I just don’t have the cash,” she said.

His lips parted, showing off a set of gums that were coated black and swollen. She almost hurled in his face.

“Everyone has a deal,” he said.

“But your lowest priced car is a thousand dollars. I only have five hundred on me, and I can’t pay a penny more than that.”

“Follow me. We can fix everything at Frank Sham.”

“Fix” turned out to be the most accurate word he’d used all day.

First he “fixed” the price—once she reluctantly agreed to certain sexual favors carried out in the dealership’s disgusting bathroom stall. Then, ready to grab the keys and get the hell out of the seedy dealership, she was forced to quickly sign a bunch of papers. Later, she learned that she had agreed to pay enough interest over the next six months that would have bought the car three times over.

That night at the shelter, she realized what she’d done to herself. With no self-worth to speak of and her faith in humanity destroyed, she let a tear drop from her eye. A tear of shame. The last tear she had ever shed.

Since that day, she’d often asked herself why she’d let him use her. She’d killed people before—mostly in a war setting—but when she’d returned to the states, she was determined to rise above those feelings of inadequacy, to not lash out at others out of sheer frustration at herself and her own life.

Frank Sham, the frickin’ maggot, changed everything.

“Look out, sweetie, a girl’s gotta go, if you know what I’m saying.” A voluptuous blonde used her tits like a battering ram, clearing the way for her to move through the swarm of folks surrounding the table. She smacked Margaret’s bare arm and shimmied through until she’d cleared the area.

Margaret fought off the urge to remove her knife, puncture those water balloons in about two point five seconds, and then slide into the empty chair without anyone noticing.

“What do you know, a redhead replaces the blonde,” Frank said. “That reminds me of a great joke.”

“Let us have it, Frank,” the dealer said with little enthusiasm.

“A redhead tells her friend, a blonde, ‘I slept with a Brazilian last night.’ And the blonde says back to her, ‘OMG, you slut. How many is a Brazilian?’”

How witty. She forced herself to laugh her ass off. Frank howled like a coyote, which just elicited another round of laughter from everyone at or near the table.

The dealer looked at Margaret and asked, “Is the pretty redhead playing this next hand?”

“No, thanks. I don’t want to embarrass myself. This guy here looks like a

real winner. I'll learn from him." She squeezed Frank's scrawny arm.

He turned and gave her a wry smile, as if he had already won her over and it was only a matter of time before he would impart his will on her.

That would only make their final confrontation that much more satisfying, she told herself.

They played two hands, and Frank won both. After each victory, he shot her a wink and she sidled up a little bit closer.

"You're my good luck charm."

"Yeah, you think?" she said sheepishly.

"I always say it's better to be lucky than good. You'll have to stick around. Got any plans?"

"Now I do." She flipped her red locks around her shoulder and curled her arm inside his.

In her first breath, she picked up a musty odor. It had to have been the suit, which was probably thirty or forty years old. Then she caught a waft of his hairspray. Glancing out of the corner of her eye, she was almost certain she spotted black magic marker on part of his scalp. There were more holes in his fake, raven-black hair than a fish net.

"Deal the cards. I'm feeling lucky today!" Frank declared.

Midway through the next hand, the blonde plowed her way through the crowd until her boobs sat two inches from Margaret's chin.

"Redhead bitch better step down." The blonde wagged her finger, arm, and neck in one gyrating, obnoxious motion.

Just as Margaret was about to grab her bony finger and snap it in two, Frank barked, "Ah, get out of here, Blondie. Your time has come and gone. Shoo!"

He chuckled, but she wasn't finished. She was just getting revved up.

Sticking her face and boobs over the table, she poked a fake fingernail into the felt surface. "Frank Sham, you promised me that if I stood by your side and held your arm, you would spend money on me. Money will rain on you all night long. That's what you said."

"Did I hear someone talking?" He mockingly put his hand to his ear, and the crowd laughed as if on cue. "I didn't think so, because we all know that blondes can't put two words together." He smacked the table. "Get the hell out of here. I got me a real woman now."

A money chip flew right across Margaret's vision, popping Frank in the nose.

"You two-timing piece of shit," she yelled, bouncing away from the table.

Frank lifted off the chair, thinking about going after her. But Margaret knew that would spoil her plans—the only reason she'd set foot in Atlantic City.

"Frank, Frank, why chase after her when you know you have a sure thing right here next to you?"

He stopped and looked her in the eye, hesitating for a second. Had he recognized her from so many years ago?

The dealer got everyone back on track. “Who wants to play some blackjack?”

“I’m not playing, but I’ll put up an extra hundred bucks for anyone here who can beat my Frankie.”

She tossed the two bills on the table, and she could see Frank’s back arch a bit. She was about to snag the ugliest fish in the whole pond. And the dirtiest.

Three hands later, he gave her an awkward high five. She began to playfully pull him away from the table, but he just couldn’t let go of the blonde from earlier.

Turning back to the crowd of misfits, he crowed, “Hey, what does a blonde and a beer bottle have in common?”

“What?” two people said in response.

“They’re both empty from the neck up.”

Frank’s howl nearly pierced her eardrum, and she brought a hand to her ear.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Red. You want to go some place quieter?”

She nestled up against his chest, releasing a sultry breath into his ear. “Quieter, sure. But I can’t wait that much longer. A girl has needs too, you know.”

She took him by the hand and led him through the growing crowd of gamblers and their good luck charms. She could hear him chuckling every other step.

“Where you taking me, Red?”

“To a galaxy far, far away,” she said.

“Ha! You want me to be Han Solo and you can be Princess Leia?”

“Sure. Whatever you want, Frank. It’s about you, isn’t it? All about you.”

She looked back and saw him ogling other females as they blew by them. His attention span matched that of a three-year-old—one that was still breastfeeding.

They weaved around a cacophony of slot machines, then through a series of left and right turns until they found themselves up against a dead end.

“Looks like you took the wrong turn. I figured you’d have this place mapped out, given your line of work,” he said with both arms planted at his waist.

“What kind of profession do you think I’m in?”

“The kind that pays pretty good. And wouldn’t you know it, I just happen to have a big wad of cash.” He grinned, and she nearly gagged.

Craning her neck, she looked off in the distance. A few people were gathered near a slot machine about a hundred feet away, but she and Frank were all alone in the recessed hallway. She grabbed his wrist and yanked him through a green door etched with “Janitor” in gold letters.

“What the hell we doing in here? It smells like shit in here,” he said, rustling his arm from her grip.

The room was no more than ten by ten, three walls lined with shelves of supplies, cleaning fluid, and various sizes of buckets. Trash cans sat in each corner, flanked by a cluster of brooms and wet mops.

He eyed the sink that was filled halfway with dirty water and said, “I thought you wanted to have sex, make a little cash. This place isn’t fit to be a urinal.” His face scrunched into a ball of disgust.

“But I thought you enjoyed getting down and dirty in nasty places like bathrooms?”

“Huh?” He turned, and his eyes went straight to the long, red locks that had been tossed to the floor.

Then his vision gravitated to the instrument she was tossing back and forth in her hands.

“Who are you?” He studied her face. “Am I supposed to know you?”

Pulling in air to keep pace with her pounding heart, she rocked from side to side, her mass low, balanced, her mind on high alert, prepared for any potential reprisal from her enemy—just as she’d been trained. The weight of the knife, the way it felt in her hand, infused her body with an additional shot of adrenaline—though it wasn’t needed. She could snuff the life out of Frank Sham with as much effort as it took to slice a cantaloupe in two. Come to think of it, the texture of the ripe fruit reminded her of what it was like to carve out chunks of human flesh and organs.

With that thought and in anticipation of what was about to happen, Margaret quivered again.

“You’re afraid of me.” Setting his stance, he stood taller, his chin a bit higher. “You might hold the weapon and think you have the balls to kill me, but you really don’t. You’re just a pathetic loser who’s going to drop the knife and walk away.”

She heard the words and watched his confidence surge again. The art of manipulation by Frank Sham, the scammer.

She didn’t reply. Air pumped through her lips at an increasing cadence as her mind sizzled, generating new, creative ways on how to punctuate her final interaction with Frank.

“Are you even human?” He pointed a shaky finger at her, his eyes nothing more than slits. “You let that war eat you up, didn’t you? And now, you’re no good to anyone. Is that all you want to get out of life?”

More breaths plunged out of her body, her vision fixated on him. How to kill him with the most pain possible.

Frank lunged to his right, grabbing the handle of a bucket and tossed it at Margaret’s face. She simply punched it away with her fist. Then she swiped her blade across his wrist, shooting blood into his eyes.

“Fuck! What do you want, bitch? You’re in charge, so just tell me,” he said in gasps while trying to cover his wound with his hand.

“Have you ever been in this position, Frank, where you’re not in charge? Where you aren’t fucking someone over, someone who has nothing?”

Sweating like a pig in a slaughterhouse, he shook his head. This closet would be Frank’s slaughterhouse. “I...I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s a first.”

On her first surge into Frank’s chest, she could hear the familiar words of a tune from years ago—*the first cut is the deepest*. Her mind played that same line through Rod Stewart’s gravelly voice over and over again as she did what she’d come to Atlantic City to do.

To make Frank Sham eat his own words, and then some.

My phone buzzed for the umpteenth time in the last thirty minutes. Or in sixth-grade basketball terms, just over two minutes of game time when filled with a turnover or foul every five seconds.

With my eyes still on the court, I slid my hand across my lap to find my purse, a practical number from Michael Kors. It had quickly grown into my grab-ass bag—anything and everything that needed to be carried for any venture with the family away from the house. Fortunately, it came with a long strap, so I was able to hoist the heavy weight over my shoulder and trudge forward like any good pack mule, or mom.

Just as the tips of my fingers found the mouth of the purse, a hand touched mine.

“Dr. Alex, I thought you were going to wait until Luke’s game was over.”

Turning to Ezzy on the bench seat next to me with my lips split to show my teeth, I had no response.

“You told yourself and your family that you’d stay away from your phone until the game was over.” Ezzy pointed at the game clock. “We still have four minutes left in the game. You don’t want to break your word.”

She was right, and I couldn’t openly admit that I was about to break my promise. “I just wanted to make sure that I didn’t forget Luke’s retainer, so he could put it on after the game.”

Ezzy nodded slowly, her wise eyes telling me I’d just created the story from vapor.

I cast a gaze across the court to Luke’s new coach and a funny thought came to mind. “Actually, Ezzy, it’s my vibrator. It’s got more staying power than any man I’ve been with.”

Ezzy dropped her head into her hands and released a couple of snorts. With her skin a shade redder, she regained her composure, but the smile on her face remained.

A bump on my left side. “Mother, did you just say what I thought you said?”

Erin had just slid in next to me; her friend, Shawna, squeezed in on the end.

My whole body tensed up, including my air passage. “Don’t know what you’re talking about, Erin. Ezzy and I are just talking about the game.”

“What? I heard you say the word—”

“Baconator, Erin.” I patted her leg like she was seven instead of a freshman in high school. “We decided to take Luke to get the new Baconator at Sam’s Burger Shop after the game, if he scores a point.”

“Seriously? He hasn’t played a minute all season.”

Biting into my lip, I glared across the court toward Luke, who sat at the end of the bench. His team, the Bulls, were a good team and had a 5-2 record to show for it. If they won tonight's game against the Hoopsters, they would secure a playoff berth. Even though he didn't like "riding the pine" as he would say, he had stuck with it, listening to his coach, working on his skills. Like any parent, I thought my kid deserved playing time, and not just the time when the team is winning or losing by thirty.

"He'll get his chance, and when he does, he'll make the best of it," I said, turning toward Erin. I got a mouth full of blond hair. She'd apparently moved on from the topic of Luke's playing time to the gossip of the day with Shawna.

Shifting my eyes to the right, I found Luke's new coach. The regular coach, who hadn't played Luke all season, was out indefinitely after suffering a hernia in practice the other night. *I think they call that "karma."*

"What's the new coach's name?" I asked Ezzy without taking my eyes off him.

"Hmm." She twisted her lips and brought a finger to her cheek. "Hamm. I think that's what I heard Luke say. Coach Hamm."

Coach Hamm patrolled the sideline with a sense of authority, but he didn't say a great deal. With a few streaks of gray mixed in with his brown head of hair, he gave off a vibe of sage wisdom, similar to Ezzy, but Coach seemed younger, closer to my age. He had an athletic build and carried himself with confidence. Easy on the eyes, that much was certain.

"You're about to drool on yourself," Ezzy said, gently popping my knee.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not blind. The coach. He's a looker. No harm in checking out the merchandise, just don't appear to be so obvious."

I waved a hand as if Ezzy had seen a mirage. She hadn't. I'd spent most of the game forcing myself to look away, and then a few seconds would tick by and I couldn't help but turn my gaze back toward him.

Shit, Alex, he has a son on the team, which means his wife is probably sitting somewhere nearby.

I poked Ezzy on the leg this time. "I don't care if he's Tom Frickin' Brady, he's going to get a tongue lashing from me after this game."

I paused, not sure if that had come off the way I meant it. Or were my inner thoughts playing games with my words?

Another whistle from the court. "Hacking foul on one-two red. One-and-one from the line," the referee said to the scorer's table just four rows in front of us.

I glanced to the side of the gym wall and noted the Bulls were up by just a point, 33-32, with just under two minutes left in the game. Leaning on my knees, I could feel my phone buzz again. It took everything I had not to pull it out of my purse and jump on the call. I knew it was Nick or Brad calling from One Center Plaza with details on what they'd uncovered on Margaret Turov,

the woman who'd allegedly brainwashed Cobb into killing several men, including Mark. And as crazy as it sounded, the former Massachusetts State Police officer might have continued the bloody trail on her own. How and for what purpose, we had no clue—if indeed Cobb's story was true and if she was acting alone. Only assumptions until we had evidence from someone other than a disturbed killer.

"Crap, crap, crap," I said under my breath.

"It's okay, Alex. Go ahead and take your call out in the hallway. I'll wait in here until the game ends."

"I'm frustrated, that's all. It's not just this case. I want to be here for the kids, but I'm feeling like crap for Luke. He works his tail off in practice, works on his game at home in the driveway, in pickup games at the park. He may not be that tall, but he's got game."

"Let's go, Luke."

I turned to Erin who was clapping above her head, and I followed her eyes down to the court. Coach Hamm had his arm on Luke's shoulder while pointing to the court, then Luke ran into the game.

"What happened?"

"Number twelve on our team fouled out. I think it was the coach's son. He just put in Luke."

Scooting to the edge of my seat, I'd never been so excited and nervous at the same time. I watched Luke jog onto the court like he'd done it a million times. I released a breath.

The kid at the free-throw line for the Hoopsters sank both shots, putting his team up by a single point.

"Crap," I said, probably louder than I should have.

The Bulls took possession of the ball as the Hoopsters fell back into a 2-3 zone defense. Coach Hamm gave a triangle signal with his hands, and the kids jumped into action. Luke and three other Bulls lined up in a single line on the far side of the lane. The point guard out front, number three, yelled 'break' and the other kids cut across the lane or out toward the three-point line. For the next several seconds, they worked their offense with precision. Luke caught the ball on the left wing and dribbled with his left hand. The defense closed the gap, but he calmly reversed his dribble and threw it back to the top of the key. Then he cut through the lane and continued running through the motion offense.

I glanced at the game time. Twenty seconds and counting. "They're milking the clock for the last shot," I said to anyone that heard me.

Rising to my feet as the clock hit nine seconds, Luke took the ball on the right side, faked left, then did a nice crossover move and drove to the basket. I held my breath as the stands erupted.

The ball went in, and Ezzy hugged me. I hugged her back until I heard a whistle blowing.

"No basket, no basket," the ref yelled. He pointed to the court and called

out, “Foul on two-four orange. On the floor. One-and-one from the line.”

Holding my breath again, with perspiration gathering in every place it could, I watched little Luke step up to the free-throw line, his team down by one with two seconds to play.

Erin grabbed me. “He’s got to make them, Mom. He’s got to.” She jumped up and down a couple of times. I placed my hand over Erin’s, feeling just as anxious as Luke’s big sister, but I tried to keep it all inside.

I took in a breath, closed my eyes for a moment. *Hit the rim, hit the backboard, please just go in.* During my mantra, my phone buzzed again. Damn, it had to be critical. But I couldn’t pick it up, even with part of my brain saying, “Lives are on the line, Alex. What’s more important—a game or a human life?”

“Come on, Luke,” I whispered.

The first shot caught nothing but net, and the crowd cheered.

“Tied up,” Ezzy said to me, her nails digging into my arm.

“Come on, baby. Drain it and let’s go home.”

He released the ball...a great arch, on line, but it hit the front rim, and my heart sank. The ball tipped right back to Luke. He went up for a shot, but at the last second, he passed it down low to a teammate, who delivered a quick layup just as the horn sounded.

I raised my fists to the sky as two other females screamed in my ear.

Down on the court, I found my son at the center of a huddle with Coach Hamm talking to the team. “Luke here has shown everyone on this team what it’s like to be a great teammate. He works his tail off in practice, and then when it counted most, he came in and gave it his all. Congrats, buddy.”

I think my heart melted a tad right then and there. It lasted for two minutes.

“What? What’s going on?” I asked Nick with one finger plugging an ear as I muddled through the crowd toward the hallway.

“Gretchen is there to pick you up, dammit,” Nick said, his intensity back in the red zone.

I stumbled into a smaller person.

“Alex?”

I looked down. The person I’d almost run over was Gretchen.

Ezzy took the kids home, and I hitched a ride with Gretchen back to One Center Plaza, where I found the team assembled in the war room. Polycoms set up on three different tables blinked red.

“Cold-calling the White House for fun?” I asked. About a dozen heads turned in my direction, and then I was practically mugged in two seconds.

“I know you had your son’s game, but I thought that was supposed to end an hour ago.” Nick’s tie was completely undone, draped around his neck.

“Sorry. Too many fouls and turnovers. But Luke won the game for them.”

“Cool. We got intel coming in on Margaret.” He pointed at the open

lines. “At the same time, we’ve got the MSP, the Pentagon, and the CIA on three different lines. We’re either waiting on information, confirmation of information, or a hint that they’ll share information with us.”

Over to my right I spotted our SSA, Jerry, his face hovering a couple of feet over the Polycom while he held a cell phone to his ear. “Let me guess, he must have drawn the CIA call.”

Nick snickered as we gathered near the front, a whiteboard covered with photos of dead people and weapons.

Suddenly Jerry yelled over to us as he pocketed his cell phone. “Just got word from Carella. Another murder. Similar crime scene as the others. He just arrived on the scene.”

“What did—”

Jerry held up a finger and went back to his call with the CIA.

How the hell the CIA was involved, I couldn’t imagine, although federal agencies had been known to exceed their boundaries of responsibility. I scanned all the photos, then looked at the team around me. A lot of head-scratching, not much leadership.

“Bring up a map of the area on the big screen and plot out the locations of each murder.”

Brad nodded, then turned to Gretchen. She tapped her keyboard a few times.

Nick said, “You’re thinking the key to finding the killer is in the numbers again, the latitude and longitude?”

“Don’t think so. That was all Cobb and his number fetish.”

“Crap. My machine froze up. I’m dead in the water.” My eyes went straight to Gretchen as hushed tones fell over the group.

“Sorry, Alex. A poor choice of words.” Now I felt all the eyes on me.

“No big deal, Gretchen.” Another couple of seconds of awkward silence, then Brad jumped in.

“Gretchen, let’s just do a cold reboot and try to get this working.” He looked over at Nick and me. “FBI procurement. Takes a congressional inquiry to get new equipment around here. We’ll have it up in a couple of minutes. Hopefully.”

The sounds of mice clicking and feet shuffling returned to our space, reducing the tension.

“While we’re waiting, can someone tell me why we have the CIA on one line? And you’ve got the Pentagon on the other line?”

Nick had his head tipped back, draining the last few drops of an energy drink.

“I didn’t think you believed in that stuff. You at least try to stay on the healthy side of the ledger.”

“I’m trying Alex, but then I heard this new drink calling my name as I stood in front of the vending machine.”

He held up the green and black can labeled “Scream.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You’d have to see the commercials. Going after the millennials apparently.”

“Then why are you drinking it?”

He paused, then crunched the can in his hands.

“All right, Hulk, I get it. Now spit up the story behind the CIA and Pentagon.”

He set the can on the table and brought a fist to his chest. “Just a little indigestion,” he said as his cheeks bulged out like a bullfrog. I could feel his discomfort.

Finally he held up a finger and walked to the whiteboard, where he tapped a picture of a familiar logo. “The Marines. This was a key point in Margaret Turov’s life, we believe.”

I propped my chin on my hand. “I’m listening.”

“We started with the state police. They gave us the rundown on Margaret’s most recent timetable, from their perspective.”

Nick covered his mouth as his body lurched forward slightly. This interaction was becoming increasingly nauseating.

I motioned him to keep going.

“The story Cobb shared about Margaret pulling him over, finding blood, then getting kidnapped...that was in the official record of the case.”

“I’m following.”

“After that, however, her boss, Lieutenant Ben Murphy—”

“Our second murder victim.”

“That one, yes. He told his peers that Margaret had started acting strangely. She’d lash out at coworkers. One time she went into a rage when someone made decaf coffee.”

“I’m not exactly a sweet princess when I don’t get my shot of morning caffeine.”

Nick dropped his hands to his waist. “You don’t think I know that?”

I smirked. “You more than anyone. Continue.”

“Her rage wasn’t just yelling and cussing. Apparently, she destroyed their breakroom. Flipped over the fridge, took a billy club to the microwave, smashed up the coffeemaker, tossed food everywhere.”

“Damn. I’m assuming she was suspended?”

“She had a strong record, a number of commendations, no write-ups. So, they talked to her and learned she felt a great deal of stress from her interaction with Cobb. She actually told them how it haunted her, how she wished she would have had the chance to kill him. Or come across him sooner.”

“It was all an act.”

“Apparently. They sent her home for two days to think over her future.”

“Did she ever return?”

“She did. Two days later, she and the brass had a long conversation. She

said she'd done some soul-searching and realized that she needed peace in her life, and she thought it was best to move out of law enforcement."

"She turned in her badge—that was it?"

"Actually, it was all too normal. She went around and hugged everyone goodbye. The guy I spoke with, a Captain McLain, said she spent several minutes talking about old times with everyone. Even had tears in her eyes on a couple of occasions."

Approaching the whiteboard, I spotted Turov's official MSP mug shot. Sporting cropped brown hair with a few blond highlights, she stared into the camera with a serious gaze. With a square jaw and broad shoulders, she appeared to be stout.

"I don't remember her looking this buff when we saw her that night at Cobb's place."

Nick stepped closer to get a better look at the photo. "Maybe. Honestly, I don't recall much about what she looked like. She sounded a little mousy, I remember that for some reason. Maybe our minds are just assuming she was that way physically too."

"Eh. Possible."

My eyes continued to consume all the photos, many of which I'd seen before from the grotesque crime scenes.

"When exactly did Turov quit MSP?"

"Captain McLain said it was four weeks after Cobb was arrested."

I was surprised to hear that Turov had been that open with her emotions. Unless she'd somehow planned this entire thing.

Keeping my gaze on the board, I asked Nick, "Do you think she set Cobb up?"

"Seems that way, doesn't it?"

"But then, why did she start killing again? If, of course, this trail of carnage is actually attributed to her and only her. She'd pulled off the perfect crime. Sounds like she could have ridden off into the sunset and disappeared forever."

"I think Cobb said it best. She's demented."

I nodded. "True. Could she have also predicted Cobb's demise in prison?"

"Hmm. Hadn't thought about that." Nick tapped his chin.

Shuffling right, I found a photo taken at night of a sedan being pulled from a body of water.

"What's this?" I turned to face Nick.

"Forgot that part. It's her personal car. A fisherman hooked it from a bridge in Plymouth County."

I could feel a prick at the base of my neck.

Nick continued. "They pulled it last week sometime. It took a while to process and trace back to Turov."

I took a closer look. "Is that a tan Crown Vic?"

He nodded, saying, "Captain McLain said it used to be owned by his department, but they sold off the old vehicles, and Margaret bought one."

"This looks just like the car that tried shoving me off the road the night everything went down with Mark and Cobb."

"Not surprising. We both knew Cobb couldn't have done all of this himself. Timing wasn't right."

"Neither was the motivation," I added.

"True," he said.

"His motivation was obvious. To please the woman of his dreams, as warped as they turned out to be. Hers...do we know yet?"

Nick splayed his arms as a light flashed just above my head.

"And we're up and running again. Sorry about the delay," Brad said, moving my way.

Shifting to a better angle, I glared at the screen where four red dots hovered over the map.

"Okay, in order of when they happened...we got the first one, Monty, here in our own backyard, Back Bay." Brad pointed at a location about two miles west of our building.

"Next, Ben Murphy, northeast of Boston, up in Lowell."

I turned to Nick, who had both hands in his pockets, standing on the other side of Brad. "Did McLain offer any insight into a possible motive for Turov to kill her former boss?"

"At first, he claimed there was nothing. But I told him we needed absolute confirmation, so he did some digging while I waited on the phone."

"Did his shovel hit gold?"

With a raised eyebrow, Nick said, "Fool's gold, if that makes any sense. Murphy apparently turned her down for promotion on two occasions."

"Why?"

"McLain was hesitant to tell, but I pressed. Then he said he found notes in her file where Murphy questioned her maturity for a leadership position."

"Not sure why he was timid about sharing that."

"There's more."

"McLain said, after Murphy died, he heard an unsupported rumor that Turov had made advances to her boss."

I snapped my fingers. "Wonder if she was just playing him, seeing if he'd take the bait."

"According to McLain, Murphy turned Turov away. Nothing happened."

"Maybe she was embarrassed?"

"Possibly."

I flipped around and faced Brad. "Let's keep it going."

"Right. We have—"

"Before you continue, can Gretchen figure out a way to draw an arrow at the original starting position and then follow the line from one homicide to the next?" I glanced over Brad's shoulder and Gretchen nodded.

“Not a problem. Give me a few seconds.”

Back to Nick and Brad. “Do you guys know if anyone has searched her home, wherever that is?”

“We’ve had an Evidence Response Team and two agents over there since midafternoon,” Nick said.

I threw a hand toward the map. “Where’s there?”

Brad gave Gretchen more instructions, and she responded like a pro.

“I gave her home a green dot,” the tiny research analyst said.

“Thanks, Gretchen,” I said, already studying the odd location of the green dot. “It’s almost sitting on top of Monty’s Bar.”

“Yeah, turns out she rented an apartment above a bar next door. She must have seen Monty quite a bit.”

A sudden stitch of guilt shot through my chest, and I put a hand on the back of a chair near me.

“What is it, Alex?”

Scanning the lines in the floor, I wondered if Turov had seen me talking to Monty that fateful night. *Did she kill him to get back at me?* Saying that to myself didn’t sound right. “Cobb said her mission was to kill the worst cheating husbands, taking up for the wives. And if we’re to believe Cobb, he said she was the unknown sniper across from the museum.”

Nick jumped in. “The whole thing doesn’t quite align. Maybe Cobb was lying.”

I pinched the corners of my eyes. “We can’t forget that murderers, even serial killers, evolve over time; therefore, the target of their obsession can change or, in this case, maybe just grow in its scope.”

Letting all the data points marinate, I pushed my weight off the chair and asked Brad to resume the tour de homicide.

“Following the line down through Rhode Island, cutting through Connecticut, then we hit New York. And right down here at the south end of New York City, the eastern part of Long Island, we have your favorite getaway, Brighton Beach.”

“Nothing but bad memories there,” Alex murmured.

“This is where we’ve made the most progress,” Brad said, walking over to pick up his tablet.

“We’ve now confirmed that not only did the two vics, Karina and Mike, know each other but Margaret grew up in Brighton Beach and went to high school at the same time they did. She and Karina are both thirty-seven.”

I could feel my pulse increase. “Tell me you have more.”

“I have more.” Brad’s dimples came alive. “Munson, out of the New York office, found an employee at the restaurant, Tatiana, who went to Grady High School at the same time as the other three. Said he recalls Margaret dating Mike, at least briefly. And then one day Margaret was out of the picture and Karina was parading around, sticking to Mike like Velcro.” Brad lifted his sights. “His words, not mine.”

I turned and stared at Nick, who said, “Her motive was as old-fashioned as they get.”

“Revenge for doing her wrong,” I said, looking back at the screen, trying to make sense of the killing pattern.

“Can you believe all we’ve learned just since you left Lewisburg?” Brad said with enthusiasm.

I leaned to my right and popped Brad on the shoulder. “Incredible work by everyone in this room.” His smile broadened. “But this type of motive...it couldn’t be any worse.”

Baffled looks all around.

“Think about it. We have no idea who wronged Margaret Turov in her life. So, yes, after the fact, the MSP can now piece together enough information to allow us to understand what would have led an apparent psychopath to kill her boss. And then we have Munson working the crime scene, learning about the high school dating scene.”

“Holy shit, you’re right,” Nick said, taking one step forward while staring at the map. “We don’t have a fucking clue who might have pissed off Margaret Turov.”

“Even more, she’s what, thirty-seven? She just killed two people for screwing with her back in high school. Think about how wide a net this could be.”

Nick pulled out a piece of gum and tossed it in his mouth. I was just glad it wasn’t another Scream.

“She could be a threat to the entire East Coast.”

“Hey, Nick, don’t forget about her tour outside of the country,” Brad said, approaching the whiteboard.

“The Marines. She served?” I asked.

“Two tours, both in Iraq.”

“Maybe that’s her connection to Bruno Chappaletti.”

“You’d think,” Brad said. “Can’t find it just yet. The Marines have never allowed women in combat roles. She served in the 1st Supply Battalion, as a bulk fuel specialist, then later as a videographer.”

“And Chappaletti?” I asked.

“2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade.”

“But they were both in Iraq at the same time?”

“Yep.”

I scanned our team. “Has anyone followed up to ask Chappaletti about Turov in particular?”

“Carella was doing that, I think. Haven’t heard if he learned anything,” Brad said.

“Crap. She’s like the black plague, if she’s acting alone.”

“Feels more like an orchestrated military assault,” Nick said.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those government conspiracy theorists who thinks our military is going to do what, take over the country?”

“Alex, I might be high on caffeine, but I’m not high.”

We shared a brief grin, and then I spotted Jerry again, his gut hanging over the table.

“Okay, tell me why he’s talking to the CIA.”

The room went quiet. “Did those three letters just put everyone in a trance?”

With Nick on one side of me and Brad on the other, my partner extended a hand to the first table with the blinking red light. A research analyst sat all alone at the table peering into his laptop.

“Who’s he?” I asked.

“Just someone from Brad’s team. Name isn’t important. We’re keeping the lines open in case one of the agencies have more information to share,” Nick said.

Brad elbowed me. “His name is Rondo.”

“Anyway, at that table, we have the MSP. I noted earlier, overall, they’ve been the most forthright, although it took a little urging with Captain McLain.”

I stepped in. “I think we know, in situations like these, no one wants to be the scapegoat. Finger-pointing can be a painful exercise.”

A quick nod from Nick, who grabbed both ends of his tie and looked to table number two. “The Pentagon.”

“You never told me why the Pentagon is involved.”

Brad cupped a hand and leaned in closer. I could smell a distinct cologne, and it wasn’t all bad. “You’re going to love this one,” he said.

Nick continued. “MSP found a hole in Margaret’s resume.”

“When?” I shot back.

“Back when she was hired apparently, or shortly thereafter. Hard to get a straight answer on that one.”

“How big is the hole?”

“It’s six months. But in this case size doesn’t matter.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “And?”

“Apparently, during one of her more transparent moments at the MSP, Turov shared that she did some special ops for the Marines, but they never told anyone.”

“I thought the Marines didn’t let women play with guns?” I said, arching an eyebrow.

“They don’t. Not officially. But you and I know that this lady is a pretty good shot. And I don’t think you acquire that skill by filling fuel on a tanker.”

“What did the Pentagon say?”

A chuckle fell out of Nick’s lips. “Jerry was leaning on that table for an hour before you got here. Even got the director involved.”

“The director?”

He nodded, his lips pursed in a straight line.

Nothing like investigating an unpredictable serial killer with military

experience while having the brass up your ass. I could feel a rush of adrenaline invade my spine. I started to rub my lower back.

“Is that guy babysitting the line with the Pentagon?” I asked, pointing to a guy at table two.

Brad spoke up. “Yeah, that’s Harold. He’s new and young. Babysitting is at the height of his skill set.”

“Oh, that young.”

A thud turned our sights to Jerry, who was now rubbing his fist, walking our way.

“What’s the scoop from our colleagues with the CIA?” I asked.

“Fucking bureaucratic bullshit, that’s what,” he growled.

While my memory was still being reimaged one byte at a time, I recalled working a case with a CIA agent a couple of years back. A so-called partnering task force that had direct implications on national security. Archie Woods was his name. He played a good game in front of me, but in the end, I learned he was using me the whole time. He fed me bogus intel while I shared everything we found on the FBI side—probably because he wanted the CIA to get the credit. A mall security guard, of all people, actually apprehended a man who was planting a bomb, someone whom I’d identified early on in the investigation as a person of interest, but whom my counterpart had blown off as a waste of time and resources. The security guard became a hero. I was thankful someone caught the bastard. If he hadn’t, I think Archie and the CIA would have pinned the terrorist attack squarely on my shoulders, the equivalent of a noose around my neck.

I took Jerry’s response and attempted another angle. “Based upon his actions, if we assume Chappaletti was, let’s say, doing a favor for an old Marine buddy, Turov, then can we get better information on his role while in Iraq?”

“Pentagon just gave the basic info,” Jerry said.

“Nothing on special ops?”

“Don’t have the security clearance. That’s what they kept telling me.”

“In the conversation with the CIA, did they try to use that line on the director?”

Jerry crossed his arms across his expansive belly. “That was a private conversation I wasn’t privy to. When he got off the call, though, he told me to find more evidence of a CIA connection or something that will rock their world. Then he’ll start swinging the bat at anything that moves, which could include a walk down to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.”

All eyes were trained on Jerry to see if he was serious or just blowing off steam. His steely eyes matched his next comment. “No bullshit here.”

I glanced back at the oversized map casting its glare on the team. “CIA or no CIA, we think Turov’s motive is now wide open. Anyone who’s ever pissed her off could be in her crosshairs.”

“Fuck,” Jerry growled. “That net’s too wide. We need to narrow it

down.”

“We’re just going where the evidence takes us, Jerry.” Nick put his hand on his boss’s shoulder. Jerry glanced at it, but kept his same grouchy expression.

“Carella,” I said, then asked Brad to call his line on the room’s speakerphone.

After exchanging quick pleasantries and updating Carella on where we stood with the investigation, we got straight to it. “First, where are you?” I asked.

“Inside one of the oldest and dingiest casinos in Atlantic City. To be more specific, the janitor’s closet.”

“Vic’s name?”

“Frank Sham. Sixty-nine years old, retired used car dealer.”

Sounded like a stereotypical casino gambler. I took in a breath, preparing for the worst. “What’s the condition of the body? Do we think it’s the same person?”

“A few puncture wounds in his chest, but he has both hands cut off at the wrist, and then each of the fingers were severed and stuffed down his throat.”

“Seems to be a pattern with this guy,” Nick said.

“You mean, girl,” Brad added.

Nick flicked a hand at Brad. “Yeah, whatever.”

“Carella, I’m assuming no witnesses?”

“None we can find. But everyone wants to be nosy, hang around the scene, and ask lots of questions. You’d think this was Elvis stuffed in the closet. Hold on, I think I see about ten of them on the other side of the tape.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking. It didn’t matter.

Tape. “Carella, anyone reviewing the video from the casino? If there’s one place with the latest video technology, it’s a casino.”

“I’ve already spoken to the director of security. He’s working with one of his guys to pull every piece of footage from every camera in the last twelve hours. Once we can find this Frank Sham, we might be able to spot a glimpse of our killer.”

“Technically, we think we know who it is—Margaret Turov. But once we find her, then we can see if she’s working with someone.”

“Actually, we do have a couple of drunk witnesses who remember seeing Sham at the blackjack table with two other women. One was a busty blonde, the other a redhead with hair down to her ass.”

Shifting my vision to Nick, I said quietly, “Neither one matches Turov.”

Chomping on his gum, Nick shrugged his shoulders while shaking his head. With his porcupine beard growth and bloodshot eyes, he looked like death warmed over. Kind of smelled like it too.

“Carella, once you get the video, have them send a digital copy to Brad.”

“You don’t think we can handle it out of New York?”

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn’t see me mocking his apparent

inferiority complex.

“Uh, yeah. You guys can own the whole thing. The two cases up here, Brighton Beach, Atlantic City, and as an extra bonus you also get the privilege of wanting to pull out your own eyeballs, courtesy of dealing with the Pentagon and the CIA.”

“Screw that. It’s all yours. Where do I send it?”

Brad gave me a sly wink, then said to Carella, “This is Brad. I’ll send you the IP to my secure server.”

“Uh, sure, do that. I guess I’ll have Tanner do that technology magic.”

My eyes caught movement on the screen.

“Just adding to our tracking map,” Gretchen said, as an arrowed line moved down the coast from Brooklyn to Atlantic City. “So, while we see that she started in Back Bay, then veered north to take out Ben Murphy in Lowell, she and/or her legion of killers have moved generally south, first into Brooklyn, and now into Atlantic City.”

Squinting, I pointed at the map. I looked around, wondering if I needed glasses. “Gretchen, can you zoom in on that area right around Atlantic City.”

“Like that?”

“Perfect.” Moving forward three steps, I tapped the screen. “Unless she’s planning on going amphibious on us, she’ll run out of land if she heads due south.”

“That’s Delaware just south of Atlantic City. It’s about ten nautical miles to cross the ocean at that point,” Gretchen said.

“So it’s possible to jump on a boat and make it to the other side,” Nick offered. “But what’s over there? Or maybe I should say ‘whom’?”

“Who, actually,” Gretchen said with a wrinkled-face grin.

“Damn, everyone’s a perfectionist around here. Who, whom. Who gives a fuck, how about that?”

Carella’s chuckle through the speaker system filled up the room.

Gretchen cleared her throat, sounding more like a human gerbil. “My family used to vacation on the east side of Delaware.” She used her pointer to circle the exact spot. “It’s a cool place called Slaughter Beach.”

Open jaws all the way around. Then the kid at table one motioned for Jerry.

“Did she just say...?” Nick flipped one end of his tie over his shoulder.

Gretchen nodded. “Yes, I did. Slaughter Beach. Never been there?”

“I can’t see all you wise guys in the room,” Carella said. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Gretchen’s eyes scanned the room, as she slowly figured out he was directing his question at her.

I jumped in. “Listen everyone, it’s no joke. Gretchen just made an observation based upon her own experience. Relax and focus on the case.” I toyed with a dangling earring—a Christmas present, according to Ezzy.

“Zoom back out, Gretchen.”

The map grew more expansive.

"The closest the perp could cross over to land would be in Wilmington. Just north of that is Philly," I said, pointing at the screen.

"Ah, the City of Brotherly Shove," Carella said.

"So says the New Yorker," Nick said.

"You're one too."

"Bronx Bombers all the way, dammit." Nick mimicked a baseball player swinging for the fences.

"Boom," Carella added for nothing more than shock value, or maybe some type of odd New Yorker bonding experience with Nick.

Ignoring the sophomoric behavior, I blew out a loud breath. "Guys, ladies, we can't just sit here and think that Margaret Turov is going to come to her senses, call the FBI hotline, tell us that she's turning herself in, and give us her exact location."

"True dat," Gretchen said.

That drew some stares.

"So, we need to dig into Turov's background, try to find anyone who's significant, and find out if they live in the general vicinity of South Jersey, Philly, or even farther south into Delaware or Maryland."

Brad brought both hands to his temples. "Alex, you're asking for the impossible. Or for a lucky miracle."

I could see the mass of Jerry make a beeline right for me.

"Alex, plans have changed," he said, using his cell phone to point at me. He turned to Nick. "First, I need you to set up shop right here. Too much shit going on all over the northeast. I need an experienced agent in this war room twenty-four seven."

Nick scratched his sandpaper chin. "Okay. Might need to run home and change clothes." He brought his nose to his armpit.

"And me?"

"Just got off the phone with my friends in Langley, and they've already seen the video of the redhead in Atlantic City."

"How the hell did the CIA get the footage before we did?"

"Who knows? Maybe they beat Carella to the scene."

"Bastards," Carella said.

Jerry almost jumped. He was so focused on the here and now it appeared he'd forgotten the New York-based special agent was listening in via phone. "CIA says they're certain it's Turov."

"So now they want to jump in the pool?" I asked.

"You got it."

"I want to see that video footage."

"You can. You will. You need to, especially since you have a new assignment."

"You're not pulling me off this investigation, Jer."

He held up both hands in defense. "Hold on, Alex. It's not like that."

I had confidence in the team, but more confidence with me leading them.
“What’s it like, Jer?”

“These frickin’ murders are all over the news. Just in the last hour, it’s escalated three levels.”

“And so why is the CIA suddenly interested?”

“They won’t say.”

“Or they’re playing stupid.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I think it’s more that, actually.”

“I’ve got to see the video, Jer. To catch this psychopath, to keep up with the CIA.” I could feel my pulse throbbing in my neck.

“Maybe you can ask your new partner on the joint task force.” He seemed to wince a bit.

“What task force?”

“The one you’re co-leading.”

“With?”

“Do you recall a CIA agent named Woods? Archie Woods?”

“That son of a bitch? No way, Jerry. He’s scum. We can’t trust him.”

“Which is why I want you right by his side, starting with the drive to Atlantic City.”

For some crazy reason, I understood Jerry’s logic.

One step into the casino and I felt like I'd been pulled through a time warp. Everywhere I turned, I spotted leisure suits, bell-bottom pants, and even platform shoes.

"Is this casino reserved for folks from the generation before me?"

"Swingers. They think they still got it," Archie Woods said, holding his mirrored sunglasses in one hand, even though the clock had just struck midnight.

"Just like you."

"Me? Come on, Alex. I'm no swinger."

"You just think you are." I left Archie with a shocked look on his face, found a security guard, and got directions to the crime scene.

Weaving through the myriad of poker tables, craps tables, and roulette wheels, my sense of direction and time faded with each turn. Every space was filled with its own unique form of eye candy, either scantily clad women performing some type of high-kick routine, bare-chested men balancing objects on their heads, or cages full of men and animals. Just as I passed one such cage, elevated about twenty feet high, a crack of a whip made me lunge to the right.

"Scare ya, Alex?"

Archie had caught up, his eyes focused on an approaching girl wearing little more than pasties.

I snapped my fingers up. "Here, doggie. You going to go smell her butt?" The not-so-tall, dark, and sleazy CIA agent simply smiled.

"Don't answer that," and I kept moving, wanting more than anything to lose him amidst the swarm of humans, but knowing I couldn't.

He jogged up next to me. "You're in damn good shape." His legs motored faster.

"Stop it. Don't butter me up. Don't harass me. If you're going to talk, tell me everything you know about Margaret Turov. Otherwise, I've heard all I can take about your African expeditions and climbs up Pike's Peak."

We'd flown into LaGuardia and then driven another couple of hours down to Atlantic City. He talked like he was being paid for each word spoken. But not a bit of it was relevant to our investigation, starting with why his agency had developed an immediate interest in Margaret Turov after they'd seen the video. I had my suspicions, but even after being extra nice to the guy, he wouldn't open up. That would soon change. I wouldn't leave the casino until I watched the video. But I also knew a video wouldn't give me the background on Turov. The CIA was hiding something, which, in itself, wasn't shocking. When a serial killer was on the loose and had ties to numerous law enforcement agencies, the hunt was motivated for reasons not necessarily

related to stopping the killing. All of the agencies, led by the biggest, the CIA, were in “CYA” mode.

We arrived at the scene, cordoned off by a web of yellow tape and casino security guards. A guard with a thin mustache spoke to someone wearing an FBI jacket.

“Sir, we’re with—”

“Hold on one second, lady.”

I thought I noticed Carella at the end of a long hallway. I turned back around and found Archie eyeing a wall mirror. He had to see what I did—a short guy with curly hair, what looked like a new perm, checking himself out. If he were a girl, I’d say he was primping. He probably saw Tom Brady. Or was it Mike Brady?

I didn’t want to interrupt the moment or lose more brain cells in annoying conversation, so I flashed my badge and slipped under the yellow tape. The guard yelled after me, but I ignored him and headed straight toward Carella and an open janitor door. About twenty other law enforcement officials were swirling about.

“The video. Have you seen it?”

Carella swung around with his notebook in hand. “Alex. Hello to you too.”

“Sorry.” I glanced over my shoulder, and I could see the curly hair of Archie heading our way.

“It’s been a long day.”

“And night,” Carella added.

“I want to check out the crime scene in more detail, but have you seen the video of the redhead?”

His face crumpled with frustration. “As soon as the CIA got involved, everyone around here clammed up. Security apparently did an end-around, or the CIA somehow seized the video before I got my hands on it. I’ve been too busy to deal with it.”

Archie walked up next to me, and Carella’s face curled into a wicked smile. “Now that we have this joint task force pulled together, I’m sure you guys are sharing information like a couple of besties.”

A person from Evidence Response called for Carella, and he stepped away.

I turned to face Archie and made sure he saw the glare of my eyes.

“What?” He took a step back, a smirk forming on his lips.

“We can go about this three different ways, Archie. You can share the video and everything you know about Margaret Turov, or we can wait for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn and I’ll eventually see it. Hours will pass, maybe days, and during that time, she will kill again. Did you hear that? She will kill another person. Maybe many people. And this blood will be on your hands. On the hands of the CIA.”

“So, what’s the third option?”

He sounded like a sassy teenager. Given my experience with the teen species, taking away his phone and grounding him from his friends would create the most pain. For Archie, I had another idea, one with a more immediate impact.

“We’re going to walk back out to the parking lot, and I’m going to kick your afro ass all the way to Langley, Virginia, so you can give your superiors a personal message.”

His smirk quickly morphed into a scowl.

“Did I push any buttons, Archie?”

Setting his jaw, he let out two gasps, as if he was trying to get the balls to tell me something.

“Cat got your tongue?”

“Alex, dammit. You do know pushing on me is only going to hurt you in the long run, right?”

I poked his chest. “I don’t care. Are you going to help me out?”

“It’s complicated, Alex.”

“I’m going to check out the crime scene. Once I’m done, I need the video and the information. If you won’t give it up, then *I’ll* pick your poison, Archie.”

As I turned, I heard him say, “Let me make a call.”

My heart was still redlining as I walked toward Carella, who was standing with a colleague near the closet door.

“Can I take a look now?”

“Believe me, lady, you don’t want to go in there,” The man from the ERT jumped in before Carella could respond. He had an acne issue, on top of an awareness issue. “The crazy shit in there will give you nightmares for years.”

For the second time in ten minutes, someone had addressed me as “lady.” And I knew it wasn’t out of immense respect for my intellect. Without taking my sights off him, I raised my badge to where he could see it.

“Twelve years with the Bureau, my man. I’m not bold enough to stand here and tell you that I’ve seen it all. I can’t. Because human behavior evolves in directions we can’t fathom. But I am experienced enough to expect something I can’t comprehend. It’s my job to get into the head of this sick motherfucker, understand the motive, figure out the next step, and stop the killing. Part of that process involves capturing every bit of clean evidence we can get. Can you support us in this effort?”

He nodded, his jaw hanging open.

Carella elbowed the young guy, who quickly said, “Yes ma’am,” and then scurried away.

“Hey, I—” Carella started giving me an excuse for his fellow agent’s faux pas. I waved him off.

“He’s a kid. They think they know everything. Goes with the territory. Give me the scoop before I check out the scene myself.”

My New York peer flipped a couple of pages in his spiral notebook. Obviously, since our last interaction in Brighton Beach a couple of days earlier, he'd yet to take the giant technology leap into the twenty-first century by using some type of electronic device. I bit my lip.

Carella looked up and glanced over my shoulder. "Your new CIA partner."

"Archie Woods. What about him?"

"Don't you want him in this conversation? You know, collaboration, transparency, and all that bullshit."

I flipped around and saw the phone pressed to Archie's ear, his free hand in constant movement. Maybe he was making some progress.

I blew out a quick breath. "You're right, it's bullshit. He'll be over here soon enough, and then I'll be forced to breathe the same air with him."

"Suit yourself. Just don't want anyone from DC bustin' my balls." He chuckled.

I kept a straight face.

"O...kay. I gave you the basics over the phone. Fortunately, the locals didn't touch the body before we got here. Took lots of photos and gathered some evidence. Most notable was that we found several strands of red hair on the ground in there. And you'll be interested to hear that they are fake. Came off a wig, more than likely."

I thought more about the video, and I tried to keep my pulse under a hundred. "I can call back to Brad and Nick later to find out if they've been able to verify if there's a connection between Turov and Frank Sham."

"While we haven't gone through all of his pockets just yet—I knew you'd want to see the body in its original state—we did find one of his old business cards on the floor. Has a Gloucester, Mass., address."

"Good to know. Can you take a picture of that and send it to Brad?"

He flapped the pockets on his trench coat to indicate he wasn't equipped to carry out such a task.

"Where's Tanner?"

"Back in the city. I'll find someone and make sure your team has access to everything."

"Thanks."

"My guess on all this?" Carella was asking me if I wanted to hear his theory.

"Sure."

"He sold her a lemon, and she made him pay. That simple."

"If that's all it took for her to commit murder, the number of people on her psycho Christmas list might rival Santa's." I smacked my hand. "Action and urgency. That's what we need, dammit."

Without saying another word, he turned on a dime and strutted toward the door opening. "Knock yourself out." He handed me a pair of blue rubber gloves, and I slipped them on.

My eyes were immediately drawn to the slaughtered used car salesman. Pools of blood flanked the body, which was sitting up and leaning against a metal shelf unit, his head cocked to one side. It was just as Carella had described on the phone, and it was the freakiest shit I'd ever seen: fingers protruding from his mouth like some sort of ritual performed by a satanic mortician.

The expression on Sham's face was nearly as disturbing. It was frozen in shock, making him seem more like a plastic replica. With his vintage blue leisure suit covered with streaks of blood—his blood, I presumed—the pain this man suffered was probably impossible to measure.

I then noticed small balloons of blood on his chest and stomach where his shirt had been ripped apart. An ME walked up and literally stood to the side and twiddled his thumbs.

"Do you know cause of death yet?" I asked.

"Really? You're asking me that before I've even had a chance to truly inspect the body?"

"Your best guess would do at this point," I said in monotone.

"I saw you noticed the wounds to his chest. Depends when they occurred, how deep they are, if they hit a major organ, the heart even. Lots of factors."

I gave him a professional nod and lowered to my knees. I began to gnaw on my lower lip.

"The nubs at the end of his arms," the ME said from behind me.

"Right. So, she cut off his fingers and stuffed them in his mouth. That's macabre, no doubt. But where are the hands, or what's left of them?"

"No one can find them. We're wondering if they might be tucked away in one of his pockets. Which is why—"

"You're standing there impatiently waiting for me to finish. I get it. One more minute and he's all yours."

Doing a quick three-sixty around the room, I tried to imagine the actual deed. Had she worn a wig to fool Sham or to hide her identity to the multitude of cameras in the casino?

Could have been both. Unlike the damage at Ben Murphy's house, this one murder had been better planned. She wasn't reckless and out of control. She'd been methodical, and apparently restrained herself until they made it into this closet.

Which meant she'd yet to deteriorate into the kind of psychopath who had a death wish. She wanted to survive. Why? Most likely to keep the ritual going.

I gave the ME a nod, ambling out of the room as I slipped off my gloves.

Taking in a breath, I closed my eyes for a moment, appreciating the life around me, people doing their jobs or just ogling from the other side of the yellow tape.

"You're out of line, Troutt."

Lifting my sights, I saw little Archie Woods marching right for me.

“What did I do?”

“Reviewing the crime scene without me. That breaks protocol for co-leads on a joint task force.”

I put a hand on my hip and blew out a disgusted breath. “I think you’ve been smoking a joint, Archie.” I swung my hand between him and me. “This isn’t a joint task force or any type of team. I’m doing my thing; you do yours. Unless you have something to share with me after your phone call back to the land of CYA-ville.”

I could see him squeezing his phone and gritting his teeth. How could he be frustrated with me? Over his shoulder, I noticed a man with a mustache talking to Carella. A prominent orange badge stuck out of his plaid sport coat: Casino Security. He actually looked familiar.

“Archie, the ME and ERT are about to take the scene apart, so you might want to hurry up and get your look,” I said.

He sped into the janitor’s closet while I introduced myself to Carella’s pal.

“Richard Poole, director of security.” He shook my hand, then glanced at my badge. “Alex Troutt?”

Even with a mostly bald head and thick mustache, he looked familiar, possibly the husband of an old law school friend. Nora and I had traded a couple of emails in the last few weeks, after she’d read about my story on some blog. With a few old pictures and stories, I’d been able to remember her and some of my time at Georgetown.

Then it hit me. “Small world, Richard.” Nora and Richard had acted like love-struck teenagers since the first day I found them holding hands while strolling across campus. They were the couple I wanted Mark and me to be. That never materialized. Her only beef in marrying Richard was being married to a guy who many would call Dick. In our emails, she reminded me what I’d told her many years ago. “Just tell everyone that your nickname for him is Big, just like Carrie on *Sex in the City*. And yes, there’s a reason for that.”

We LOL’d each other in our emails, which had helped me feel like I had even more of a foundation in my life.

I thought Nora had said Richard was working in corporate security. It didn’t matter much. But would using my friendship with Richard’s wife help me get my hands on the redhead video? Without question.

His hand touched my elbow. “Small world, indeed, Alex. I knew you were FBI, but I thought you worked out of the Boston office,” he said.

“I do. But this homicide here is one of many that we think was done by the same perp.”

I tipped my head to the side, indicating he should follow me, which he did. We were now separated from Carella and everyone else.

“What can you share with me, Alex?”

“Officially, nothing.”

His mustache shifted like a squirrel lived inside it.

“But, unofficially, since we—and Nora—go back a long way, I can tell you that the person who we think killed Frank Sham might have killed at least four others. And that’s just during this phase of her work.”

“What do you mean?”

I paused. I didn’t want to have to explain my life story, open myself to a dagger in the gut.

“Wait a second.” He wagged a finger as we strolled down the hallway.

“Nora told me about this. I can only say that I’m really sorry, Alex.”

“Thanks, Richard.”

“Actually, I’m surprised you decided to stay in this business.”

Huh? He was comparing corporate security with riding shotgun on a serial killer investigation? To each his own. He was a nice guy, so I wasn’t going to pin him against the wall. That made me think about Archie. I glanced over my shoulder and verified that Curly Boy wasn’t lurking right behind us. All was clear.

“Eh. What else would I do?”

“Work corporate security,” he said, chuckling.

“One thing that would help us at the FBI a great deal would be for you to show me the video footage you guys captured on the redheaded suspect.”

He scratched his chin. “CIA was all over that,” he said.

“They’re newcomers to the investigation. I’ve been working this case back before...”

I chose not to say it, but he nodded.

“Follow me,” he said.

He swiped his badge across a security pad at the first door off the hallway. We wound through the bowels of the casino, then took a left at a T. Finally, we came to two glass doors and entered a room with about forty monitors on it. Off to the side sat a young lady who looked like she was editing video.

“Missy, pull up the Frank Sham video.” The girl did a double take, as if Richard had asked her to cross some ethical line. I had to hold back from saying something to the effect of, “Who the hell made the CIA the ultimate authority?”

She finally turned back around and clicked her mouse about a dozen times.

“Your friends at the CIA appeared to be most interested in two segments,” Richard said as we watched video zoom by in double time or faster. “The redhead did her best to keep her face averted from the cameras. But here’s the one decent shot of her face.”

Missy paused the video just as the redhead lifted from her chair, her hand on Frank’s shoulder.

The straight red hair was hard to ignore, if not for the purple-rimmed

glasses and considerable makeup, especially the obnoxious dark eyeshadow. And she wore a dress that highlighted her bust. I thought about the woman from Cobb's house and then the mug shot from her MSP days. She had appeared to be plain, not memorable in the least. Leaning closer to the monitor, I studied her nose and lips. I noticed the position of her cheekbones. It was subtle, but there was a similarity to the Margaret Turov I'd seen, both in person and in the picture back in the war room.

"This is good. Can you show me the next segment?" I'd yet to see why the CIA was acting so territorial.

The video footage moved in reverse in fast motion. It was like watching an old Charlie Chaplin film.

"Getting close here," Richard said, pointing a finger.

"Oops, went past it. Let me play it in real time from here," Missy said.

How had I missed the monumental event that had multiplied the CIA paranoia factor tenfold? I'd only blinked a few times.

"Slow it down a bit," Richard said to Missy.

I saw the back of Turov in the lower right side of the screen; she was speaking to someone.

"That's a waiter?"

"Yep. He's already been interviewed by Carella. He's clueless and has nothing to do with any of this, from what Carella said."

With my eyes back on the video, Turov took a couple of steps toward the center of the screen and tripped, awkwardly falling to the ground.

"Her purse slipped away. Right there. You see it?" Richard said.

"Sure do."

"We were able to blow it up and we think...let me re-emphasize, *we think* the grip of a knife slides out. You can just barely make it out here," he said, pointing, then shifting his eyes back to me.

A number of men rushed to her side. "Chivalry at its best," I noted.

"A lot of imitation chivalry in a place like this. The stories I could tell," Richard said. I glanced at him and noticed his mustache making an odd twerking motion.

He moved his hand down the screen, and I turned my attention from his mustache to the video.

"Keep your eyes peeled to the top right part of her back. It's difficult to see very well through the strands of red hair."

A couple of seconds ticked by. "And freeze," he said.

The hair had parted just enough, revealing part of her back that the dress didn't cover.

"You do see it, don't you?"

"I see something. A tattoo, right?"

He nodded. "Okay, Missy, I think her eyes are about like mine. Show Alex the enhanced still shot."

Five clicks of the mouse, and the screen was filled with Turov's

shoulder.

My pulse instantly ticked a little faster. “The hammer and sickle emblem from the former Soviet Union.”

I was a little fuzzy on when I’d learned these facts, but I recalled studying about Communism, the formation of the Communist Bloc, the long-running Cold War with the United States, and the endless propaganda machine that fueled the people’s blind acceptance of the rules enforced by the corrupt leadership. For the Soviet leaders, the well-known emblem that adorned their country’s flag were symbols of the industrial worker and the peasant from the Russian Revolution—everyone bound together, working for the cause. But for the regular person on the street, and foreign intelligence agencies like the CIA, that emblem brought sentiments of ruthless tyranny. And distrust.

Like a flare shot through the sky, a thought exploded in my mind.

I took out my phone and snapped a quick photo before Richard could say anything.

“Give me a second,” I told Richard, stepping to the corner of the room while dialing up the war room back in Boston.

“Whatcha got, Alex?” Nick said, his voice echoing a bit. He had me on the speaker system.

“I’m not sure you’ll see the actual video, but I’m sending you a screen shot of Turov. She’s sporting a tattoo.”

“Okay. She’s got ink. So does half the world. Everyone’s always trying to make some type of prophetic statement. I’m not impressed.” His voice sounded tired and garbled.

“I know that. Hold on.” I tapped my screen three times. “The photo is on the way.”

I heard a number of voices talking over each other.

“Nick?”

“Hey Alex, Brad here. Just got your photo. Gretchen is putting it on the big screen.”

I heard someone say, “Boom,” and then silence. I looked at my phone to make sure we hadn’t been disconnected.

“So, while I’ve seen a few tats like this before—” I started.

“Probably quite a few in Brighton Beach, given its Russian roots,” Nick said.

“True. And Turov is from there. But for some reason, I think this tattoo is what got the CIA all riled up.”

“Why?” Gretchen’s squeaky voice.

I cupped my hand to encircle my phone and mouth. “As crazy as it sounds, I’m wondering if they think Turov is working with the Russians.”

“But all of these murders appear to be associated with Turov’s personal life,” Brad said.

“I’m not saying they aren’t. I haven’t been able to think it all the way

through and make all the pieces fit.”

I heard the door swing open behind me and glanced over my shoulder. “Listen. I need to get back to work. Not sure how to do this, but if there’s a connection between Turov and the Russian government, or some faction from that region who is sympathetic to the Communist cause, we need to find out if this killing spree could be a terrorist action. With the CIA not turning over any information, it won’t be easy, but we need more intel. Maybe get the New York office to question Bruno Chappaletti again. Yeah, push on that angle. Later.”

Turning back around, I saw Richard and Archie in a discussion while Missy was running through more footage.

“You had no right to show anyone that video,” Archie said.

I looked at the moving images on the screen.

“Do you have a court injunction? Last I heard, the CIA doesn’t rule the country,” Richard said, holding his ground.

Archie turned around and saw me looking at the video.

“Stop the video,” he ordered Missy, who immediately paused it.

“Alex, you know I was trying to help you out, and now you go around my back.”

I had no desire to get my pulse any higher. I looked over his shoulder and couldn’t help but giggle.

“What’s so funny?” He flipped around to the still screen where Turov was holding up a middle finger to the camera.

“That’s the last image we got of her before she left the casino,” Richard said.

I popped the CIA agent on the shoulder. “I’ve got the same message for you, Archie. Fuck you.”

I swung the door open and headed back to the crime scene.

A wall next to a bathroom door held up my weight as I watched more law enforcement personnel scamper throughout the area. I began to tune out the conversations as my eyes grew heavy. Despite all the anxiety of seeing a mangled body, and especially dealing with the bipolar behavior of our so-called partner agency, the CIA, a yawn escaped my lips.

I knew my dramatic exit from the security room didn’t make any progress toward making friends within the CIA. But I could be used for only so long. I’d endured a hell few women or men ever experienced—a long road trip with Archie Woods. He played the raunchy *who-me?* character well. Almost too well. Whether that was his actual persona, who knew? Maybe that was how he was able to lie so easily. Given my brief interactions with CIA personnel, truth and transparency were considered optional at best.

Through the blur of activity, a waving arm came into focus.

“Alex, you have that zombie look. You didn’t hear me?” Carella walked

in my direction while glancing over his shoulder twice.

Pushing off from the wall, I plodded a couple of steps while pinching the corners of my eyes. “I was deep in thought. What’s up?”

“ERT team just found a slip of paper in the front pocket of Sham’s shirt. They’re extracting it now, working with the ME to make sure they don’t disturb any of the wounds.”

I nodded, not very jazzed by the information. We didn’t need receipts or betting slips or love notes. We needed hard evidence. Ideally, I’d take Turov’s exact address or phone number—of course, that was a pipe dream. All kidding aside, we had to figure out the pattern behind the wave of killings. What was Turov’s real goal, and whom was she targeting next?

“Hey, I appreciate the work, but what’s a piece of paper going to tell us? We need something to get out in front of this murder machine. I just can’t tell you what that is.”

“Yeah, you might be right. “ Carella turned around when a man in a blue ERT shirt called out his name. He stepped away, and I yawned again—this one showing all teeth. I was frickin’ tired.

I’d barely had time to fall back into my trance when Carella called to me. “Alex, over here quick.”

His waving arm tried to get me to move faster than my feet wanted to go. As I was headed that way, I heard my name from the opposite direction, in a tone that wasn’t very pleasant. “Alex Troutt, you have some explaining to do.” I didn’t bother swinging my head around. I knew it was that annoying asshole, Archie.

I approached my FBI colleagues. “What’s up, guys?”

Before words left Carella’s mouth, my eyes locked in on the plastic bag he’d just taken from the ERT guy.

I lifted my sights and found Carella’s face full of white and red splotches.

“You allergic to all of this?” I asked, extending my arms wide.

Just then, Archie pulled up to the group, his mouth on overdrive.

“Enough of these games, Alex. Where you go, I go.”

I slowly turned my head. “I could make you eat those words in so many ways. But I’m all about restraint. Because anyone who has ever dealt with you surely believes that you need a strait jacket for your mouth.”

His face turned red, and he moved half a step closer, his foul breath making me recoil. “You think you’re so smart and witty,” he said with saliva shooting out of his agitated face.

“Anyone have a splash guard?” I wiped my face clean, disregarding his ignorance.

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with. No. Idea.” He jabbed his finger twice to emphasize his point.

“Finished with your tantrum yet? You’re the one holding out on me... actually, all of us.” I extended my arm to the two others witnessing the

pointless squabble.

“Yeah, well you can just—”

“Archie, shut the fuck up,” I snapped then turned to Carella. “You were saying?”

Lifting his elbow slightly, apparently to keep Archie from seeing the goods, Carella held the edge of the plastic bag with two fingers directly in front of my face.

“What am I looking at?”

The baggie rocked back and forth.

“A note.”

“From who?” I asked.

Carella scrunched his eyebrows until they connected, looking like a furry caterpillar. “Look closely.”

I couldn’t follow the moving target, so I held out my hand and Carella transferred the bag to my two fingers.

“What? I just see a crumbled receipt with faded purple letters.”

“Other side,” Carella said.

Flipping it around, I could feel Archie’s warm breath in my ear.

“Personal space,” I said without taking my eyes off the baggie.

“You see it?” Carella asked.

Tilting the bag toward the ceiling lights, the words hit like a lightning bolt.

“What does it say, dammit?” Archie asked.

“Enjoy the chase, AT. We’ve only just begun. J MT”

“Who the hell is AT?” Archie scratched his head, and a bed of curls all moved in unison.

I ignored Archie and met Carella’s eyes.

“Is this sick game all about you, Alex?” Carella asked.

My lips didn’t move. I couldn’t confirm or deny the premise. But I knew one thing. With no more real evidence, we were virtually assured there would be another murder.

A final puff of the sweet aroma of applewood-smoked bacon blew out the door just as Sam Beck's combat boots hit concrete outside of Mary Lou's Diner. Using the bottom of his old, fatigue-green T-shirt, Sam cleaned his sunglasses as he squinted against the sun. Having downed a plate full of blueberry pancakes, along with two eggs, sunny-side up, and five strips of that mouth-watering bacon, Sam paused on the sidewalk. The crisp, early-morning air filled his lungs, infusing his body with a surge of adrenaline. Too bad the air couldn't unclog his intake of cholesterol. If Dr. Budde had witnessed that overindulgence, he wouldn't hesitate to pick up the phone and call Mrs. Beck.

"To hell with them. A man needs a little bit of freedom in life," he muttered, realizing immediately he was searching for anything to justify going against his doctor's orders.

Sam released a sudden belch, covering his mouth a second too late, just as a couple he recognized walked past, heading into the restaurant.

"Excuse me," he said, his baritone drawl, which sounded more and more like the actor and author his wife always mentioned. What was his name? Ah yes, Sam Shepard.

"Guess the food is still pretty good," the older woman said with a crooked smile, her eyes twice the normal size behind coke-bottle glasses.

Sam tipped his Penn State University cap and helped with the door until the couple was safely inside.

Making his way toward his ten-year-old Ford F-150 SuperCab, Sam recalled a time when he was about seven or eight, exiting a similar breakfast diner with his father, when he took in the ever-present, lingering scent of chocolate in the air. For a little kid, that was the bomb dot com.

"That'll be the last time you smell that chocolate. Shutting the factory for good this coming week," his father had warned him.

Such was life in Hershey, Pennsylvania, where Sam was born and raised and had lived his entire life, outside of two tours to the Middle East as a Marine—one to Afghanistan early in the war and one to Iraq two years later.

Chocolate was still one of his cravings, right up there with bacon. But outside of his family, one of his passions was keeping his shooting skills sharp at the firing range. More than that, he enjoyed showing off to his lifelong friends and even wagering a little here and there, when he felt extra confident of his steady hand and keen eye.

Weaving in between parked cars, he couldn't help but grin. "Today might be the day I go all in." A month ago, he'd put down a hundred bucks and lost it on the last shot. Today, though, his confidence was running high. He would up the ante to two hundred dollars and guarantee to hit the center target with twelve straight rounds, the first six using his Springfield Armory

1911 pistol, the second from his DPMS AR-15. He'd used similar firearms as a Marine, and both had saved his ass, and a few others, on more than one occasion. Now that he was stateside, nothing got his adrenaline pumping like firing his two favorite guns, especially at the exact moment he pressed the trigger and watched the target hole appear a hundred yards away.

His boot kicked a rock, and for some reason, his thoughts flashed through a quick flurry of images from the segment of life that he'd tried to forget. That one mission when everything went wrong. Terribly wrong.

Blinking his eyes, he stuffed those thoughts back into the compartment labeled "It's Too Late to Change Anything." He then spotted the same rock and booted it away, severing his memory as best he could.

When he reached his faded red pickup, he glanced in the bed and grimaced a bit. He'd been putting off cleaning up the old rebar, concrete remnants, and a plethora of tools and trash from a little home project he'd started but never finished just as winter set in last year. Looking to the blue sky, he wondered if he'd procrastinated long enough to be able to just restart the project. Anything to avoid the considerable clean-up effort.

Sliding into the front seat, Sam slammed the door shut and turned over the engine on the first try. He blew warm air into his hands and looked at the car stereo on the dash. Music came to life, a country tune by Kenny Chesney. Sam began to hum the classic rhythm of "You and Tequila."

A flash of motion across the dash's dark plastic, and Sam slid his hand toward the front, oversized pocket of his cargo pants.

"Ah!" he called out as a blade broke skin on the right side of his ribcage.

"Hiya, Sammy," the woman's voice said from behind the front seat.

"Margaret?" he grunted, glancing down and seeing crimson spots on his T-shirt.

"So glad you remember my voice, Sammy. It means a lot to me." Her voice sounded too pleasant, maniacal even, and his brain was flooded with images he'd just tried to permanently store away.

With his mouth instantly parched, he said calmly, "Why are you here, in Hershey?"

"Why do you think, dumbass?"

He saw more movement through the reflection on the plastic, and he attempted to turn his head.

"Eyes straight ahead, both hands on the wheel."

She was always a natural at barking out orders, even if her rank and gender never allowed for it.

"Margaret, seriously. What's up with this hiding-in-the-truck bullshit? You could have just called me up, and we could have met for coffee."

She cackled like a wicked witch, and with that, another rush of pictures and sensations inundated his brain.

"Very funny, Sam. It's like you think I have no memory of our fun times together. All of us. One big, military, dysfunctional family."

“Listen, Margaret. How many years has it been? Ten, twelve years? Long enough to put the crap behind us and move on with life. We can’t undo what happened. I wish we could...for you, for me, for all of us. But as I’ve told the other guys, we can’t relive the past. Look forward, not backward.”

He felt her blade press into his skin, and he winced.

“Quit trying to be a fucking psychiatrist and put the truck in reverse. This place is too crowded.”

Sam guided the truck to the exit. “Which way?”

Lifting his eyes for a quick second, he caught a glimpse of Margaret through his rearview. She had the same brown, cropped hair, a few more lines on her face since the last time they’d been in contact. She found his glare in the reflection. A glint of red speckled her brown eyes, and he could feel her fury.

“Have you never gotten help from...you know?”

Her crowing laughter pierced his ears as she swayed and hit the back of the truck’s cab.

“Dammit, Sam, you’re hilarious. You think all of this is about what we did or didn’t do in some mosh pit in the Middle East? Rather naïve, Sam. Turn right.”

He did as she said, and they slowly made their way west through the city. She gave him instructions to continue the westerly trek on Hersheypark Drive. Looking down at the steering column, his fingers were within an inch or two of being able to flash his brights. Very few cars were out this early on a Saturday morning, so he’d have to time the flick of his fingers with the passing of another car.

Trying to act as casual as possible, Sam could feel his heart thumping like a runaway train. Beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead just under his cap, and he began to worry it would become visible to Margaret.

He knew what she was capable of. He’d seen her do things that he didn’t think any woman, or man, could do. And then there was that one night, after everyone had given up hope, and alcohol had been consumed in massive quantities. That night, more than any other in his life, he couldn’t shake, no matter what type of justifications or mind tricks he tried.

But she’d just denied any type of revenge, hadn’t she? At least in a roundabout way. But it wasn’t easy reading Margaret. She’d often shown a propensity for being unpredictable, which at times escalated to deathly volatile.

Sam spotted a black Corvette with red racing stripes turning in their direction, and he moved his hand up slightly to prepare himself for reaching out his middle finger and pulling back the lever for the brights.

But what if she saw him do it? He knew the answer before the question processed in his brain. She wouldn’t wait until they reached their destination, or even ask him to pull over to the side of the road. She would gut him like a pig, even if it meant crashing the vehicle.

She'd live. She always did, despite the carnage that she produced.

The corvette drew closer, under a hundred yards. It was now or at least wait until another car passed. His finger left the steering wheel...but wait.

What if the corvette driver responded by flashing his brights in return?

Holy shit. His chest instantly felt like it had been crushed by the weight of his truck, and it was next to impossible not to breathe with more labor.

"You all hot and bothered, Sam?"

He tried to let out a chortle, and it sounded forced, pinched even. "Uh, yeah. I get turned on when a person hides in my truck with some type of hunting knife that could slice concrete in half."

"I guess you're not like me," she said. "Pain and suffering can often open a door to a new self. A new way of looking at life."

Is she serious?

Of course she is. She's Margaret Turov.

He wasn't sure which was moving faster, the blood coursing through his veins or the scrapbook of memories that flooded his mind. His brain could feel the pressure get more intense, as if someone was using a pump to inflate his head. And that only made him sweat more.

"You starting to think about that wife and kids of yours."

Gritting his teeth, he pushed aside thoughts of his family. He was a pro at doing that.

"Come on, Margaret," he said with more force than he intended. "Let's sit down like two human beings and talk this shit out. Okay?"

"Talk, talk, talk. That's all people want to do with me."

He looked in his rearview.

"What? Are you actually judging me, Sam?"

"No."

"I saw that look of absolute disgust on your face. You think I'm a complete psychotic lunatic, don't you?"

"No one is the same after war, Margaret. Not with what we had to endure...you had to endure."

"Take a right here," she said, not acknowledging his words.

The old Ford's brakes squeaked a bit as he turned into an enormous, empty parking lot.

"Drive around back, to the left here," she said.

He turned the truck left and began to coast, the growling cadence of the engine now more noticeable.

"What are we doing at an amusement park?" His eyes gravitated upward as they passed the elaborate Wildcat roller coaster in Hersheypark.

"You'll see. Just keep moving until we get to the red guard shack by the employee entrance."

A moment later, he pulled up next to the shack.

"Kill the engine and get out, hands on the hood," she said.

With his hands flat on the hood, he watched her crawl out from the truck.

She wore cargo pants and a tight-fitting, ribbed sweatshirt. But it was the weapon in her hand that made him catch his breath.

“Spread your feet.” She used a boot to kick out his left leg as she shoved his head downward, bouncing it off the hollow metal. His hat dribbled off the hood.

“Ah, Sam, what happened to all your hair?”

A sudden breeze blew across his head where only a few scraggly hairs were attached. Normally self-conscious about losing nearly all of his hair in his mid-thirties, he instead focused on the feeling of the breeze as it dried his sweaty head, cooling his core body temperature.

“Margaret, you know I was on your side, right? The whole damn time.”

He started to stand up, and she threw a punch into his left kidney.

He winced. “Shit, what was that for?”

“Got to search you first. Protocol. You should know that.”

He held his breath as her hand reached his thigh pocket and stopped.

“Look at what we have here,” she said, lifting up to show him his own gun. “A Ruger LCP. A nice little backup piece.”

“I forgot I had it on me.”

She brought it closer to his face. “Sure you did, Sam.” Without warning, she slammed the gun into his nose three times.

Blood went everywhere, and she hopped back a step, her arms at her side. He took advantage of the opportunity and lunged for her gun hand.

In the blink of an eye, he felt a piercing stab just above his shoulder blade, and he dropped to his knees. He could feel something warm slithering down his back.

“Get up!” she barked.

With blood dripping off his face, he tried to push off his knee to stand, but he had no control of his left side.

“My shoulder, arm muscles. I can’t move them, dammit,” he said, his voice quivering.

She grabbed his good arm and pulled him up. “You’re not going to die right here in some desolate parking lot. That takes all the fun out of it.”

“What fun? This is fucking barbaric, Margaret. You don’t have to do this.”

She picked up on his trembling voice. “Is little Sammy scared?”

As he stood there, she emptied the Ruger’s ammo and scattered the bullets in the weeds by the fence, then she turned and hurled the gun into the park behind a row of trees.

“Come on,” she said.

Through blood-blurred vision, he looked ahead and saw the gate chain had been cut. He instantly stopped in his tracks, standing as erect as he could, his injured arm hanging useless at his side.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Emotion had started to drive his actions, and he couldn’t do anything about it.

“Sam, don’t play hard to get again. I’m not up for it, dammit.”

“Screw you, Margaret. If you’re going to kill me, just do it right here. You might as well go get that gun, find the bullets, and put one through my head.”

She turned and faced him, dangling her knife in front of his eyes.

“Have you forgotten about this little guy?”

He cocked his head back slightly. “I get it, Margaret. You’ll probably kill me, but even with one arm, I’ll make you suffer.”

She flipped on a heel and plodded to the gate, then pulled it open and extended a hand.

“After you, sir.” Her lips turned upward until the sunshine bounced off her protruding cheekbones. A deranged grin.

He shook his head. “I don’t know what has happened to you. I thought you were fucked up before, but now...”

“And the truth finally comes out,” she screamed to the sky.

A shaky breath escaped his lungs. He wiped blood from his eyes with his good arm while trying to test out the injured one. It wouldn’t budge.

“Dammit, Margaret, just tell me what you want!” His voice cracked as he belted out the words.

“I want you to be the good soldier and march your ass into this park. We’re going to have a helluva time, Sam.”

“I can’t do it. I’m not going to do it. You really don’t want to hurt me. You have some kind of vendetta against the military or something, and I’m just the easy target.”

“If that’s what makes you feel better, then I’m okay with that.” She tapped the edge of her blade on the chain-link gate. “Don’t waste my time, Sam. I’ve got a schedule to keep.”

“Schedule? For what?”

“Sam, don’t make me,” she said, recoiling her hands around the grip of her blade.

“This is twisted, Margaret. Fucking twisted.”

She pressed her lips against her teeth and then huffed out a breath. “If you don’t get here and die like a real man, then I’m going to chop off your head, put it in a nice planter, and drop it by your home so your wife and two kids can see Daddy one last time.”

“What the hell?”

“You don’t think I’m bluffing, do you?”

“No.”

“Good. Because, if necessary, I could create an entire gift basket of Daddy appendages, use some shredded filler paper of various colors as the perfect accent. Actually, that’s the perfect word. Shredded. That would be my theme.” Her eyes glazed over.

His battered mind shifted gears, and he recalled that morning’s top story on the *USA Today* blog.

His breath chopped off his words before he could finish them. “Y...y...you.”

“Yes, Sam?”

He yelled out, “You’re the nut who’s carving people up like some pieces of art?”

“Haven’t thought of that analogy, but I guess that would be me,” she said, bringing the flat end of the blade to her chin. “I kind of like it actually. I’m an artist. But I’m no starving artist.” She giggled a snort through her nose.

He shook his head. “What happened to you, Margaret? I thought you had a sense of decency and fairness about you. And now all you do is act like a fucking animal and kill indiscriminately? That is fucked up. You’re fucked up!” He stabbed his finger at her as if a poisonous dart would shoot into her body and bring the mighty Margaret to the ground.

But that was no more than a wasted imagination.

Margaret let out a slight giggle, and then it turned into knee-slapping laughter. “Dammit, Sam, you crack me up. Brings tears to my eyes, really. Oh my.” She gathered herself and then continued. “I don’t choose my victims, Sam. They choose me.”

He shook his head to clear his brain, trying to make sense of what she’d just said. “Choose you?”

“By their actions, Sam.”

Dropping his head, he spotted the gathering pool of blood around his boots. He closed his eyes for a beat, searching for the internal willpower that would bring about superhuman strength or an idea that would lead to his freedom—and Margaret’s death.

Lifting his sights, she motioned for him to move, and he started to shuffle his boots on the pebbled pavement.

“Good boy,” she said, like he was a dog obeying its master.

A few steps along the path in the amusement park, and Sam fought his imagination of what she could do to him. *Would* do to him.

Two birds swooped across the walkway and into the nearby red oak, releasing a string of playful chirps. Their innocence and gratification with life did not go unnoticed by Sam, who still couldn’t determine exactly why she’d chosen him.

“Margaret, you can’t kill me without letting me know why.”

“Eh,” she muttered. The knife stayed pressed at his back as they strolled past the concession stands with metal cages covering the openings.

Sam could see the Ferris wheel off to his left and the mega roller coaster just ahead, but she pushed him to keep moving deeper into the park.

He stopped and looked her in the eyes. “Let me start by saying I’m sorry. I’m sorry for anything I said or did to you in that godforsaken hell hole. It wasn’t me. Not the real me.”

She glanced away for a couple of ticks, and with that came a flicker of hope that he was finally reaching the core of her being, what made her human.

“Margaret, I’m not a perfect person, but I’ve tried to learn from my mistakes, even all the crazy shit that went on in Iraq.”

He paused to see how she’d react. She licked her lips, then ran her fingers through her short mat of hair.

An infusion of adrenaline gave him hope and more energy in his presentation. “Easing back into the real world wasn’t easy for me. But I’ve done it for my wife...and for my boys. They’re the ones who can benefit from all this. To teach them what I’ve learned the hard way. Loyalty, standing up for what you believe, and doing the right thing when no one is looking. Character. Yep, it’s all about character.”

She didn’t respond verbally, but he could see the tension in her neck subside, the knife sagging slightly from her loosened grip.

He’d gotten through to her, he was certain. Now, how to exit the park and get to the police station without engaging her volatile temperament?

“That night,” she said and his heart skipped a quick beat.

“It was bad, Margaret. I’m so sorry I couldn’t...I didn’t do more.”

Her eyelids shut for at least thirty seconds—so long, it seemed, that he wondered if she’d put herself into some type of self-induced trance to rid herself of the horrors.

Swallowing just once, it made a crackle in his ear. He winced, hoping it wasn’t audible enough to wake her. He picked up his boot and moved one step to the left.

“You shamed me, Sam.” Her eyes popped open, the whites now etched with red veins, her breathing pattern picking up speed.

“I...” He backed up a step, holding up his good arm in defense as she walked closer.

“I don’t like it when a man shames me.”

“But I was the only one who—”

“You don’t get it, you spineless piece of shit. Men never do.” She tapped the knife against her palm.

“I thought you understood. I thought you were starting to see the light,” he said, losing his balance.

She swung her boot, and he toppled onto his ass.

Looking down on him, she said, “Oh, I’ve seen the light. Have no doubt about that.”

He followed her eyes as they looked beyond the trees. The top of the roller coaster.

“You’re going to die, Sam, but I promise it’s going to be the ride of your life.”

And Margaret didn’t disappoint.

The cell phone buzzed, clicked, and rang while rattling across the glass bedside table for a good ten seconds before my brain realized it wasn't a dream.

"Huh?" I said to no one as I lifted my head from my pillow, the incessant noise now pummeling my senses.

Slinging my arm off the side of the bed, I pawed for the phone that wouldn't stop moving. Did that damn thing have eyes?

"Crap!" My thumb had just bumped it off the table.

The carpet muted the rattling as I swung my torso over the side of the bed. My arm couldn't quite reach the phone.

"Dammit!" I kicked and twisted my body, but soon found my legs tangled in the sheets. Somehow, I'd basically tied myself into a sheet knot on the bed at the hotel above the casino.

I inhaled a deep breath, taking in another dose of the wretched odor. I'd asked for a non-smoking room, but it seemed like I'd bathed in smoke all night.

Rubbing my eyes for a brief second, I begged my brain to break through the haze. I hadn't taken my first sniff of the hotel room smoke until I saw the sun peeking through the dusty curtains about three hours earlier.

Using my toes and arms, I thrust my weight forward, sliding off the bed while picking up the phone on my way down.

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

I heard three quick knocks on my door before the person on the other end of the line responded.

"Alex. Need to wake up, darling. It's your best pal, Archie."

I scowled at the door. "Hold on!" I yelled.

"Alex, it's Nick."

"You too. Hold on, Nick. I gotta put some clothes on."

Tossing the phone on the bed, I found my khakis and FBI-issued T-shirt, slipped them on, and then picked up the phone while I walked to the door.

"What?" I said as I simultaneously opened the door and spoke into the receiver.

Archie just stood there with that stupid grin and his arms splayed as I pointed to the phone.

Nick started first. "Alex, just got word that there's been another—"

"Didn't you hear?" Archie interrupted.

With my jaw hanging open and my mind now craving caffeine, I found myself in this odd state of inaction.

"Don't you need to do something to your hair, put your face on or whatever chicks do?" Archie said, glancing around the room as if he might lay

claim to it.

I'd just found the ignite button for my brain. "*You* can go straight to hell," I said while jabbing my finger at Archie's face.

"Damn, Alex, sorry if you woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Did you not get enough sleep?" Nick asked with an apologetic tone.

I clutched the phone with both hands, taking my scowl off Archie and turning away.

"No, no, Nick. Sorry, I wasn't talking to you. Archie knocked on my door at the same time you called. Confusing as hell, I know." I rubbed my face. "And by the way, I might have closed my eyes, but I'm not sure I truly fell asleep. What is it, ten, ten thirty?"

I heard a fingernail-tapping sound behind me, and I turned to see Archie holding up his fancy watch, a face as large as a sundial. I made sure he could see me roll my eyes, and I rotated back to facing the curtains.

"Nick, I didn't get in the room until seven. I let Carella get some sleep while I oversaw the crime scene."

"Alex? Hey, I'm on the line."

"Carella?"

"Nick conferenced me in just before calling you. Thanks for covering for me last night. Sorry if it sent you over the top."

"No worries. I'm good." I glanced at Archie over my shoulder. He had both hands at his waist, his face etched with deep lines that told me he was irritated. I'd been there tenfold in the last twenty-four hours, and mostly because of him. Well, that and some psychotic murderer who'd decided to include me in her fun and games.

I blew out a breath, then stepped over to Archie, realizing the last thing I could deal with was him nagging at me for the next ten hours about what I'd learned on this call.

"Guys, I'm going to put you on speakerphone so Archie can listen in."

Archie gave me a single nod and reset his stance, as if I'd followed orders like a good girl. I bit into the side of my cheek as I tapped the icon on my phone. Over the speaker, I heard someone in midsentence say, "...with the CIA, remember?"

"Okay, real quickly, who is on the call besides Nick and Carella?" I asked.

"Brad here."

A throat cleared and a high-octave voice said, "Sorry. Gretchen here. I have a bit of a cold, or allergies, or something."

"Sorry to hear that, Gretchen. Nick, you were saying earlier?"

Archie butted in. "There's been another murder, Alex. I tried telling you that when I walked in here. Damn, woman."

I looked at him, my nostrils flaring. "Is your name Nick?"

"But—"

"Never mind. I'm just looking for a single person to speak without being

interrupted.”

Archie crossed his arms and stuck out his bottom lip. *Oh brother, now the CIA tool is upset we didn't anoint him Dictator in Charge.*

“Another murder,” I said. “Nick, got details?”

“Jerry called me thirty minutes ago. He'd been contacted by the chief of police in Hershey. Even though we have alerts out to all law enforcement agencies, the chief apparently had seen so much on the news he didn't even need the alerts to let him know that the man they found was killed by our perp.”

My gut flipped inside out, knowing we'd let another slip by us.

“Crap!” I padded away from Archie.

“Where you going?”

“Pacing. Helps me think.”

“By the way, I basically had the same info,” Archie said.

Shaking my head, I tried to ignore his attempt to build himself up. I asked, “Nick, do you know how long it takes to get to Hershey from here?”

“I don't know. Maybe two, three hours.”

“We're going straight there,” I announced as I searched for my purse. “Go pack if you need to,” I told Archie.

“I'm a guy. What would I have to...? Hold on. I do need to go back to my room for something.”

“Meet me in the lobby in ten minutes.”

He turned for the door as Nick chimed in with, “These murder scenes keep getting crazier. This poor sap was spotted at the top of a roller coaster.”

“What?” Archie said, the door already open.

“Roller coaster. Need me to spell it?” Nick sounded annoyed at Archie. Bravo for him.

“I hadn't heard that part,” Archie said, striding back to me and the phone. “We were still waiting on detailed information when I came down here to Alex's room. Nick, tell them to not attempt to bring him down. No one gets on the roller coaster until they have a bomb squad give the okay.”

Archie looked at me as he said this, and slowly my brain began to think like him.

“You and your CIA pals are thinking that Turov is some type of Russian terrorist and that she's waiting until first responders or investigators get on that roller coaster, and then she'll blow it up. Is that how you're thinking?”

“Alex, you know I can't get into that. It's classified...and above your pay grade, frankly.”

Flexing my jaw, I fought back the urge to delve into a mindless argument with a mindless nitwit.

“Nick, can you—”

“I've got the number right here,” Brad said. “Let me step away and call the Hershey police. Alex, I'll tell them you and Archie are on the way.”

“Cool.” I let the timeline sink in a bit. “This Turov person is on a roll like

we've never experienced. Just looking at the sheer speed she's moving and killing, I'd actually lean toward Archie's thoughts that it could be tied to some predefined hit list that someone put together as an act of ongoing terror. But every person so far has been connected to Turov personally."

"Except for Monty at the bar," Gretchen added.

"Well, on that one, we made the assumption she knew of him most likely since her residence is next door."

"If you ask me, it's a personal vendetta," Nick said. "I just can't get myself to jump from a single tattoo all the way to a terrorist act. What's next—we learn that this entire sinister plan was developed by a high-ranking official in the Kremlin?"

I arched an eyebrow toward Archie, who curled his lips inward as if they'd been stapled shut. If only I could be so lucky.

"I'm mostly with you, Nick."

"Uh, thanks. Wait. You said mostly?"

"Turov essentially recruited then brainwashed Cobb to help her carry out the ring homicides."

"It's almost as if she was outsourcing the work she couldn't do," Nick said.

"That's an interesting term, but it might match her intentions. She finds someone to do the tasks she can't do, for whatever reason."

The words lingered in my mind for a couple of beats.

"Alex, Brad here. Just got off the phone with the Hershey PD."

"Oh, did you ask that—"

"Yes. I told them you guys were on your way and to keep the crime scene intact until you got there."

"Okay. Thanks. By the way, how did they find this guy on top of the roller coaster?"

Nick jumped in. "When the chief and I spoke earlier, he said a medevac copter was flying back from a car crash, and they spotted the body."

"Wow. Okay."

"It gets better, or worse, actually. The pilot moved in closer, pulled out a pair of binoculars, and realized he knew the guy. Apparently, they both belonged to the same gun club."

"I wonder if the vic was in the military?"

"He was. A former Marine, actually."

"Turov was a Marine, in a support role, of course." I gazed at Archie, who pretended to turn a key into a lock on his mouth. I almost chuckled out loud.

"Not sure of his exact unit, but his name was Sam Beck," Nick added.

"Let me run with that," Brad said. "The Pentagon isn't sharing much, but I'm certain we can get the basic info, even if we have to lie and tell them we're with the press."

Archie guffawed.

“What?” Brad said. “It’s strange, but sometimes certain government agencies only jump when their practices are about to be exposed.”

“Good, Brad. Let us know. Carella, you still there?”

“Yeah,” he said with a muffled voice. The sound of running water could be heard in the background.

“Are you being waterboarded?”

“Brushing teef.” Next was a quick gargle and a spitting sound, then the water was turned off. “Okay. Sorry. I’m here.”

“Now that you have minty-fresh breath, I need you to interview Bruno Chappaletti one more time,” I said.

“Can’t Munson do it?”

“He can, but you’re in the middle of all this. So, whether you fly, hitchhike or drive yourself, I need you to talk to him one more time today. Before we get to Hershey, if possible.”

“Not possible.”

“Try.”

“What else am I going to ask him?”

“We think he’s been in contact with Turov. We think she might have hired him to kill me, or to injure me. I’m not sure which.”

“He’s just going to keep reciting the same Semper Fi bullshit.”

“He could. Brad, we need the info on Beck’s Marine background. I’m wondering if he and Bruno are from the same unit. Get that to all of us on this call in the next two hours, please sir.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Carella, if Brad verifies what I’m guessing, then you can share that with Bruno. I want to know what his reaction is.”

“Yeah, okay. Makes sense. It’s just crazy how many murders and crime scenes we’re working.”

“Yeah. I bet she’s enjoying every minute of watching us run around like a herd of cats.”

We ended the call, and Archie went to grab something from his room. The cat comment brought to mind how much I missed being in our home, Pumpkin included. Usually on Saturdays, we’d eat a lazy breakfast, courtesy of Ezzy’s homemade cooking. Then, if we didn’t have to run around to games or practices, we’d try to accomplish two goals for the day: learn something new and do something active.

While we were stuck with Boston’s harsh winters, we were fortunate to have at our disposal a long list of museums and historical places in which to learn something new. The “do something active” goal was actually more of a hassle in the last couple of months, once again due to the ridiculously cold and snowy conditions. Twice we resorted to jogging around the house. Ezzy had even joined us, although she opted out of the stair-running portion. The funniest moment came when Luke dangled a piece of tuna off a string in front of Pumpkin, who led our procession for a good thirty seconds before he

finally lunged with his rolls of fat and snagged the fish with both paws like he was a center fielder with the Red Sox.

I texted Archie and told him to bring the car around front while I called the kids. I had quick conversations with both of them—it was their decision to make it quick, not mine—but it was still worth it when I heard each of them say “Love you, Mom” at the end.

Making my way downstairs, I picked up the familiar casino waft of smoke mixed with cheap colognes and perfumes. I’d seen just about everything in this job, and I was physically beat. I knew another assessment of my life was needed. But not until the killing had stopped and Margaret Turov had been caught. It was unfinished business until that happened.

I pushed through the swivel doors and was met with a stiff breeze and lots of yellow.

“What the hell is this?” I asked Archie as he rested a wrist over the steering wheel of a sports car that looked more like a bumblebee with its black racing stripes.

“The casino had a car rental place, so I traded in our vanilla car for this puppy.” He grinned like a five-year-old on Christmas morning.

Sleazy Archie would be my companion for the next three hours. And I was so thrilled.

The pulsating engine grumbled as we coasted into the back parking lot at the amusement park. Heads turned and eyes rolled—the locals apparently a bit turned off by the yellow sports car. I was right there with them. My vision had already spotted the top of the roller coaster in the distance above the tree line.

“Come on,” I said while stretching into the backseat to grab my FBI jacket. I leaned just the wrong way and brushed my still-bandaged arm off a metal seatbelt restraint while my ribcage endured a stabbing pain that I felt all the way through my gut. A not-so-gentle reminder of my fight with Bruno Chappaletti.

“Now you want me to tag along with you. We’re making progress,” Archie said.

“Actually, if they need someone to volunteer to disarm a bomb, that’s what you’re for.” I shoved the heavy door shut and began walking.

“What are you talking about? I thought we just broke the ice on our relationship?”

I stopped in my tracks, ignoring for a second the approaching blue uniform heading our way. “What you call breaking the ice, I call survival. I just spent three hours in the car with you. I think I deserve the Medal of Honor.”

“Hey, that hits me right here.” He thumped his chest, then held his arms open wide. A gust of wind actually shifted one of the tight curls on his head, and I had to hold back a quick chuckle.

The CIA agent whom I knew I couldn't trust and couldn't stand being around had surprised me on the trek across Pennsylvania. He'd opened up about his family life, or lack thereof, given his propensity to leave a trail of heartbroken women—so he said. Shockingly, after our brief discussion, he mostly shut his trap. Given his empty gaze across the roadway, I suspected he'd been doing some soul-searching about his life and where he'd taken it. I wondered if that included an assessment of his habitual behavior of lying.

“Are you guys with the joint task force?” Thankful for the interruption, I turned and saw the extended hand of a young uniformed officer with perfectly round eyes.

I pulled out my badge and shook his hand, then introduced my CIA counterpart with as much enthusiasm as I felt—very little.

“I'm here to make sure you find the crime scene command center.” He turned and headed toward the gate. “Can I get you a soft drink or bottled water?”

While it was obvious where the officer fell on the Hershey PD organizational chart, I appreciated the courtesy of the chief and the officer's politeness. Glancing at Archie, I knew those were two words I could never use to describe him.

As we wound through the amusement park grounds, I pulled out my phone.

“Anything from Carella yet?”

Archie had snuck up to look around my shoulder.

“No, Mr. Nosy.”

“Hey, I want to catch this crazy bitch too.”

“I would have thought the CIA would have beaten Carella to the punch.”

He scratched his chin and looked away. “Between you and me, I called it in, and I think the CIA brass tried. But it was going to require having to share some classified information, and I'm betting that didn't happen.”

I held my gaze for an extra second, astounded he'd shared the CIA's intent—if it wasn't anything more than a ruse. What would his sudden, albeit brief bit of transparency get Archie and the CIA?

“I'm wondering if Carella got held up somewhere,” I said as I pocketed my phone.

“Or Chappaletti could have lawyered up, and they told him to keep his mouth shut.”

I nodded, knowing Archie's suggestion was a distinct possibility. On top of sleep deprivation, I could feel an intense pressure building at my frontal lobe, and I knew why. Stopping a lunatic killer took a break, usually an individual with ties to that person coming forward and sharing key information. Bruno was a special case, though, since he had a military background and very possibly had taken orders directly from Turov to assault me.

“Just up here.” The officer led the way to a temporary open-air tent.

As I rounded the corner to the tent, I saw an enormous red and white fire truck hulking in the shadows of the roller coaster. The fire truck's engine rumbled, muting most of the conversation in the tent.

We soon learned that two rescue firefighters had climbed up the telescopic ladder to inspect the body. It was obvious he'd been dead for a few hours, but they did not touch the body in any way.

One of the firefighters, a guy named Ralph, who must have stood a foot taller than my five-six frame, handed helmets to both of us. "I know you have those fancy badges that can get you into any building or home in America and a few outside of our great country, but if you intend to go up that ladder, you have to wear these."

While I couldn't see how a helmet would do me much good if I plunged two hundred feet to the ground, I didn't care much about my appearance. Earlier at the hotel, I'd substituted a shower with a brief face wash and two quick wet hands through my locks. Makeup was hardly noticeable. I was mostly concerned that I'd brought a locker-room odor with me. Thankfully, the command post was outside with a generous wind out of the west.

I pulled the chin strap tight and caught Archie out of the corner of my eye.

"What the hell are you doing? It's not going to bite."

Archie's stressed face looked like he was trying to convince himself to stick a stake in his heart. Or adorn a hat with lice.

"Wait a second," I said as he hovered the helmet about three inches from his head. "You're afraid the helmet will mess up your new fro."

I started to giggle, then covered my mouth.

"Screw you."

Ralph turned back around and gave Archie a funny look.

"No thanks," I said.

"I, uh...I'm not thrilled with being in closed spaces. Yeah, I start to feel claustrophobic when I have a hat on my head, especially one this big."

Ralph led us to the fire truck and up to the roof at the base of the turntable ladder. He put a foot on the first rung and stopped.

"I don't want fifty people on this thing at the same time, so one of you goes first, followed by the other. Then I'll bring up the rear."

I nodded and took a step. "I guess I'll go first."

Ralph held up his hand. "Not until your partner secures his helmet."

Turning around, I saw Archie gripping both sides of the helmet. It was on his head, but it didn't appear to be touching his precious hairdo.

"Seriously, Archie? Get a grip, man."

"I'm good. Just waiting for the signal." He tugged the chin strap tight as he winced.

Ralph and I both shook our heads in annoyance, and then I began the hike upward. Barely ten rungs up, I could feel the wind pick up. Lifting my eyes to the end of the ladder, I could see it sway a bit.

“Is that normal, the ladder moving and all?” I shouted down to Ralph.

“Yep. You just learn to ignore it and trust your training.”

I nodded and kept moving, but I could hear Archie say, “But we never got any training. Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Jesus H. Christ. Don’t tell me they gave me someone who was afraid of heights?” Ralph said with an exasperated tone.

“Alex, you must be afraid of heights. I’m not afraid of heights,” Archie said as his voice pitched higher.

“Whatever.” Truth be told, I wasn’t thrilled with heights, but it wasn’t a crippling fear. I continued making slow, steady progress up the ladder. I glanced down and found Archie about ten rungs behind me. Ralph appeared to be coaxing him to move faster, or to move at all. I wasn’t sure which.

Five rungs from the top, I paused. I could see the side of Sam Beck’s face, a few wayward strands of long hair fluttered in the wind. Peeling my grip off the rung above me, the stiff breeze cooled my hand that had started to get clammy. The anticipation of seeing any crime scene often brought an unsettled feeling. At two hundred feet above the ground and knowing that I’d likely be forced to observe a macabre image that might haunt me for weeks, my stomach had already started its flip-flop routine.

I forced out a breath and climbed two more rungs.

“Holy shit,” I said to myself.

I had to blink twice to make sure it was real.

Beck’s head sat awkwardly against his left shoulder. Like the other victims, it appeared he’d showered in blood. His own blood, I was certain.

I lifted to my toes. Not much blood in the seat of the roller coaster, so it was safe to assume the act of murder had likely taken place on ground and then Turov had placed Beck on the roller coaster, turned it on, and stopped it at the top.

All to make a statement. To create her perfect little killing vignette.

I could hear Archie grunting behind me. The ladder rocked a bit with each step he took. He sounded as if he was...I tried like hell not to go there.

Shifting my feet six inches to the right, I followed the trail of Beck’s blood to his back. I shoved my hand to my mouth, hoping I wouldn’t hurl all over the men below me.

His spine had been split in two right down the middle. Beyond that, it was a complete mess of lifeless body parts flopping outside his cavity.

“Is that his spinal cord?”

“What? I gotta see?” Archie sounded like a scared child.

He bumped the bottom of my calves.

“Hold on, Archie. I’m not sure this ladder is wide enough for two people.”

He and Ralph engaged in a quick conversation while I pulled out my phone and took several pictures.

I swiped my thumb to open a group text, then heard a swooshing sound

as I hit send, hoping the technology wouldn't let me down, and Nick, Brad and Carella would soon see the images. Especially Carella. If he had yet to interview Bruno, showing him the images might elicit something more than his regimented Semper Fi response.

A grunt in my ear just as I felt a man's body press against my backside.

"Whoa there, Archie."

"Hiya, Alex," he said in my ear while chomping on a piece of gum.

A spearmint odor wafted across my space.

"What do you think you're doing?" I was completely wedged against the rungs of the ladder, his man parts all up in my business.

"I think I just got over my fear of heights," he said with far too much excitement. "Ralph gave me a piece of gum and told me chew it to the rhythm of a song. He said it helped him when he first started in the department almost twenty years ago."

"Okay, but that doesn't explain why you think you can grope me from behind," I said through gritted teeth. I pulled my elbow back and considered ramming it into his sternum.

"You don't want me to tumble to my death, do you?" He patted my elbow.

"You took your hand off the ladder."

"Sure did. Want to see me go with no hands?"

"Tempting, but you'd probably grab me if you started falling."

As I turned back to continue inspecting the body, Archie jostled the ladder.

"Dude, what now?"

He moved up another step, his head now just above mine.

"Holy crap, Batgirl. That lady knows how to throw a murder party."

"Pretty sick, huh?" I turned my sights to Beck's neck and back. The grisly sight was even worse on the second view. Craning my neck to improve the angle, I think I saw crumbled pieces of his vertebrae dangling from flesh and dried blood.

I looped my arm up and transferred the phone to my opposite hand.

"You're taking more photos? You must have a sick scrapbook at home."

I clicked the phone off and realized my breathing had become quite labored.

"Dammit, Archie, it's time to get off me. I didn't know your scrawny ass had this much weight."

"It's not my ass that weighs a lot." He forced out a chuckle.

Oh, how I wished we were on the ground.

"Can you start moving down the ladder?"

"Say please."

"Get your ass off me, dammit."

"You seem focused on my ass," he said through laughter. "But it's not my ass that's on you."

“Archie!”

“Hold on. I see something.” He bumped my helmet over my eyes as he reached across the dead body.

“Don’t screw up the crime scene, Archie. We can’t afford to destroy any evidence—”

“It’s a piece of paper,” he grunted while reaching farther. “Stuck in the collar of his T-shirt, but it looks like it might fly out. I just about have it.”

“And?”

“Hold your horses, sweet pea.”

More grunting, then, “Got it.”

“What does it say?”

“Nasty. It’s covered in blood.”

He rubbed his fingers on the back of my jacket.

“Did you just...?”

He chuckled as he opened the paper just above me, gripping it with both hands.

“It’s written on a credit card receipt from some place called Mary Lou’s Diner.”

“Okay. What does it say?”

“Boy, her handwriting is bad.”

A gust of wind blew it out of one of Archie’s hands.

“Dammit, don’t lose it.”

He gripped it tighter. “It says, *An adrenaline rush like Sam has never experienced. Me either:). Enjoy my work, AT. Something tells me we’ll meet soon.*”

An intake of air caught in the back of my throat as another breeze drew water from my eyes. I replayed the words. Obviously, she was enjoying this cat-and-mouse game more and more. She would kill, and we would come running. In between the murders, we’d barely had time to work the crime scenes, review any obvious pieces of evidence, and if we were lucky, take a deep breath. Getting ahead of the curve to figure out who might be next had been slow going at best.

The last part of her message replayed in my mind: *Enjoy my work, AT. Something tells me we’ll meet soon.* Was she just taunting me because of my connection to Mark and, in her mind, I was the face of all law enforcement? I’d met her just once in my life. I found it hard to believe that she had the same pent-up rage against me that she apparently felt for the victims. The sheer number of murders was mind boggling, but so was the predictability of who and where.

My pulse doubled its pace as I thought through our options. It was hard to imagine how the murders would stop unless we caught that one big break. But where would it come from and would we even have the time to notice it amongst the constant flow of carnage?

“Let’s get the hell off this ladder, share the note with the team, and figure

out our next steps.”

Archie complied without saying a word, which, in itself, shocked me. Maybe he knew when I couldn't take anymore. Two rungs down, I could feel the vibration of my phone. I stopped, hooked my arm around a rung, and pulled out my phone to see who it was.

Carella.

I tapped the green button. “What's up?”

“You won't believe the shit I just got on tape.”

“You interviewed Chappaletti?”

“It wasn't easy, and he insisted on his lawyer being there,” he said, panting like a dog who'd just run a mile.

“What did you get?”

A tug on my pants leg.

“Hold on. I don't want to get pulled off a ladder two hundred feet above the ground,” I said into the receiver.

“What, Archie?”

“Who is it?”

“Carella. He just got through talking to Chappaletti.”

“Let me hear,” he said, taking a step back up.

“Hold on there, guys,” Ralph said from below. “This shit is crazy. You can't be holding conference calls, conducting business as usual while we're two hundred feet up.”

“Sorry, Ralph.” Archie and I both spoke at the same time, and then we locked eyes for a brief moment.

I went on to say, “A minute wasted could cost us another life. Give us two minutes.”

I heard Ralph mumbling something about holding a gun to our heads, but I'm sure he was just blowing off steam.

“You guys are on a frickin' ladder?” Carella asked.

“We are,” I said while trying to shift my weight lower so Archie could hear. My fist knocked his helmet over his eyes.

“Hey, dammit, watch the hair.”

“I hit your helmet. At least the one sitting on top of your hair, which also looks like a helmet.” I spoke into the phone. “Carella, tell us what you learned.”

“Well, it wasn't until you...hold on. Sounds like you're in a frickin' wind tunnel.”

I knew I would regret it later, but I said, “Archie, move your ass up here.”

“There you go again. You and my ass.”

“Archie?”

“I'm moving, dammit. You sound like my old little league coach. He taught me how to cuss.”

He lifted his body up one more rung, and his face was eye level with my

breasts.

“Damn, I just hit the jackpot!”

“Unless you want me to put my foot straight up—”

“But then you’d rack me, and I’d let go of the ladder and fall to my death.”

“Glad you understand the proverbial ledge you’re standing on.”

I noticed he tightened his grip on the side of the ladder.

“Sorry, Carella. We’re in position. Go ahead.”

Archie’s lips turned upward, a snide comment at the edge of his lips. I gave him the eye.

“The first thirty minutes of the interview went nowhere. Same Semper Fi crap. On some of the questions, his lawyer would butt in and tell him not to respond.”

“Lawyers. What use do they serve?” I couldn’t help myself. “Go on,” I said.

“Sir, you’re disturbing the others. You need to step outside.” An unfamiliar voice.

“Carella?”

“But...okay, dammit. Whatever,” Carella said, followed by a loud creaking noise.

“Crap. They kicked me out of the front reception area. I’m standing outside now. So, I was saying, I saw your email come in with the pictures of Sam Beck. Without asking permission from his lawyer, I just stuck my phone in front of Bruno’s face.”

He coughed a couple of times, and it sounded like he’d hacked up a black lung.

“Any reaction?”

“Reaction? He fuckin’ lost it. He started wailing, pounding his fists on the table and shit. It was disturbing.”

“Dammit. So he knew this guy, Beck,” I said to Archie, who just gave me a simple nod. “I wonder if there’s some type of strange lover’s triangle thing between Bruno, Beck, and Turov.”

Archie said, “But Bruno is alive, and it appears she might have hired him to do some dirty work.”

“Maybe Bruno won the contest.”

“Guys,” Carella broke in. “He spilled his guts. Bruno, Beck, Turov... they were all part of a special ops force run by the CIA.”

I looked down at Archie. “You knew this, didn’t you?”

Shaking his head intensely, he shot back, “What the hell? I don’t know shit about this.”

“You’re full of it, Archie. You and your cloak-and-dagger fraternity had this information and kept it away from our team.”

“There’s more,” Carella said just as Archie had pointed a finger at me, nearly poking my breast.

I thought about snapping it like a twig, but I didn't want to send both of us airborne. Ralph wouldn't be happy.

"More about what?"

I could hear his labored breathing again. "This is some heavy shit. Although, Archie, you might already know it. Hard to tell with you."

"You guys have it all wrong. I—"

"Save it for another time," I said with an eye roll. "Carella?"

An even deeper exhale. "What he told me is classified information. His lawyer told me that after our discussion."

"Okay, who gives a shit? Go on."

"Bruno said Margaret gave the group a nickname. The Bandits. At times, she'd called them the Little Banditos."

"They stole something?"

"Yes, but more than that. More than anything, Bruno said, she always said they made off like little bandits."

"What did they steal?"

"That was their first mission, deep in the heart of Afghanistan. They were directed to intercept a drug-smuggling exchange, steal the product, and kill anyone who tried to stop them."

"What the hell would the CIA want with a bunch of drugs?"

"Opium. Supposedly worth close to a hundred million dollars," Carella said.

Archie stayed silent as I cast my gaze across the amusement park. A couple of hawks glided past my sights and landed on the far loop of the roller coaster.

I shook my head. "Archie, this is for you as much as Carella. Why is the CIA in the business of stealing from drug smugglers? Risking lives to do it, even."

Archie gave me another tight-lipped shrug.

Carella said, "Bruno didn't get into that. He and his squad just followed orders. But it had to be about the money, right?"

I wanted to grab Archie by the lapel and shake him until he opened up. But given our lofty position, I used a single finger to nudge his shoulder.

"Hey, be careful, Alex."

"So tell us then."

"I don't know, okay? I'm a field agent, not the director of Homeland Security."

I growled, and I could feel perspiration beading at my hairline.

Carella spoke up. "That was just the first mission. There were more. A lot more."

"Did he give you details on each of them?"

"Not even close. He guessed they went on eighteen, maybe twenty total missions. Each one, he said, was more dangerous than the previous. Some of the guys started getting scared and spoke up, wondering if they were being put

on a suicide mission.”

“You know we haven’t even touched on how Turov was a part of this group. Remember, women, especially, Marines, aren’t allowed in combat.”

“Bruno actually chuckled once when I noted the same thing. He said that Margaret not only had the strength of the strongest guy he knew, but she had skills no one could match. Hand-to-hand combat. The best sniper he’d seen. But more than anything she had this instinctive drive to kill. Bruno and his buddies called her The Machine because she was able to carry out the orders and didn’t seem to care who was killed in the process. Margaret never batted an eye. Said she was born for that role.”

“Straight from the horse’s mouth,” I said in a monotone.

“Crap really hit the fan for the Little Banditos on their second-to-last mission. Two Marines were killed, along with one contractor hired by the CIA. They blamed each other...contractors against the Marines. It was ugly, and Bruno said the group figured they’d be disbanded and they’d all return to their normal jobs.”

“But there was one more mission,” I said.

“Yep. Intel had come in that there was going to be a meeting of top officials from six different factions of terrorist leaders, including a splinter group from the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Hezbi Islami, and a couple of others. They were gathering in a small home at the edge of the main valley in the Kunar province. Supposedly, it’s one of the major hotspots in the entire Middle East. Borders Pakistan.”

“What happened?”

“I think you need to hear Bruno’s version first. I gotta say it’s not for the faint of heart.”

“Play it.”

A pause, then we heard a rustling sound. “Damn phone. Hold on. Wait... here it is.”

I could hear sobbing echo throughout the interview room.

Carella: “Tell me, Bruno, what happened on that final mission.”

More crying and gasping snuffles.

Some other voice, most likely Bruno’s lawyer: “You don’t have to do this. This won’t buy you—”

Bruno: “Just shut the fuck up, will you? I have to tell someone. Anyone. Look what the hell she’s done. To herself. Even to me.”

There was a long pause, a rattle of metal on metal, and a prolonged snort. Archie and I traded stares. His face had tightened. Perhaps he didn’t want to hear the story. Perhaps he already knew the story.

Bruno hissed out a breath, then said: “We were dropped into the lower Hindu Kush Mountains. Middle of the night. We were lucky—not a bit of light. No moon. Nothing. Of course we had on our night-vision goggles. Not much was said, other than standard comms. We found the Kunar River without much trouble, started following it.”

“Alex, Archie.” Carella had stopped the recording. “Bruno fades away here for a minute or two. No emotion, but no connection to anyone in the room. His lawyer pinged him with a couple of questions and then he suggested to me that his client might be having a nervous breakdown, a surefire sign of PTSD. He asked the guards to take him away. But then Bruno snapped back to it and insisted on spilling his guts.”

A call from down below.

“Give us another minute, Ralph,” I shouted, then, “I’m all ears, Carella. Hit play.”

“Here it goes.”

A heavy chair squeaked across a floor, and a bundle of keys jangled.

Carella: “I’m still here, Bruno. Not going anywhere as long as you want to talk.”

Bruno: “Kunar is one of the deadliest places on the planet. Formally, it’s called the N2KL province—one of four provinces in Afghanistan the military has given that designation. Among those on the frontlines, it’s been called Enemy Central. It’s basically a shitstorm just waiting for someone to light a match. You can’t trust anyone, yet I know there are normal people there who are trying to just survive one day at a time.”

A throat cleared and then a deep intake of air.

Bruno in a quieter tone: “We met some of them. Yeah...”

Again, his voice trailed off.

Carella: “You met some kindhearted folks who weren’t trying to kill you? Must have been nice for a change, huh?”

Bruno, after a couple of beats: “Yeah, uh, I’ll get to that in a minute.”

Carella: “Okay. You and the team were moving down the Kunar River.”

Bruno: “Right. Eyes were in constant motion, but we were in super stealth mode. Made good headway and then paused behind a cluster of rocks and spotted lights from a small cottage, smoke pouring out of the chimney. Not a lot of activity around it, but we did see four guards standing outside, walking around, smoking, with AK-47s over their shoulders.”

Carella: “How big was your unit?”

Bruno: “We were down to twelve. Six Marines, four contractors, and two CIA guys. They had final say on whether we carried out a mission or pulled back because the risk might be too high.”

Carella: “Did they call to abandon any of your missions?”

A long pause. My eyes shifted from the phone to Archie. He averted my gaze.

Bruno: “No. Never. I’m not sure they understood the term ‘risk.’ It’s like they were fuckin’ kamikazes or something.”

Carella: “So they gave the go-ahead.”

Bruno: “Yeah, but we played it as safe as we could.”

Carella: “Including Margaret.”

Bruno: “Even Margaret. She didn’t have a death wish. She was always

trying to show she was tougher than any guy out there. But that night, all hell came down on us, and she was just like the rest of us. Scared shitless.”

Carella: “What happened?”

More rustling, as if someone had moved in his seat.

Bruno: “We couldn’t just blow up the place without knowing. First, the brass wanted visual evidence of the kills. I’m sure they wanted to flaunt their victories, maybe leak it to the public, hoping that others who were thinking about joining one of these crazy terrorist groups would think twice. And second, we weren’t in the business of killing innocent civilians. At least I didn’t think we were.”

Another glare at Archie, and he continued to stare off into the sky with nothing more than a blank expression.

Carella: “The hell that came down on you guys. Did it come from the house or where?”

Bruno: “I can still remember that first muzzle flash from the cottage. I about swallowed my tongue. Then before I could get my rifle up, it fucking rained bullets. Pinging the rocks all around me. God knows how I didn’t get hit. But they were everywhere. They came out of every nook and cranny in the mountainside. It was like we kicked over a mound of fire ants.”

Carella: “How long did it last?”

More metal clanging and a drawn-out breath.

Carella: “Bruno?”

Bruno: “Fuck, man. It’s...”

Carella: “Tell me.”

Two pounding thuds. I jerked the phone closer to my body, my free hand squeezing the side of the ladder. Bruno must have lost it momentarily. Still, Archie looked away.

Bruno: “One of the CIA guys, called himself Chewy because he was so damn hairy, he shifted position, flanking right to get a better angle on this cluster of shooters. Not ten feet from me, I saw him take about twenty bullets. His head exploded like a pumpkin that had been dropped off the side of a building.”

Carella: “Holy shit, man.”

Bruno: “Yeah, I’m telling you. War...it’s fucked up. I could hear people screaming, some from the team, a few out there yelling with joy.”

Carella: “Damn. How did you get out of there alive?”

Bruno: “Luck. During a brief lull in the shooting, I followed that other CIA nut job who wanted to rush the house...I followed him down this hill that headed toward the back of the house. I just knew I was about to breathe my last breath. Do you know what that’s like? To know death is milliseconds away?”

Carella: “No, Bruno. You tell me.”

Bruno: “Thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest. I could see the house up ahead. Maybe fifty yards. I knew if we got to the side of it,

we'd have decent cover. I picked up my pace. Then we were at twenty yards, bullets flying past my ear, taking chunks out of the ground to my left and right. I couldn't control my breathing. Every step was like lifting a thousand pounds, but I couldn't give up. At about ten yards, someone from behind me yelled, and I flipped my head around. That's when I tripped and dropped to the ground, banging my head off a rock. I looked up and saw that I'd fallen over a dead man. Not two seconds later, the CIA guy took four to the back and died a few feet from the house."

Carella: "Shit."

I could sense Carella's growing discomfort with the Q&A session. But he pressed on like he knew he had to.

Carella: "Where was Margaret during all of this?"

Bruno: "That woman was..." He chuckled once. "A fucking machine. She took out two more who came out of the house after me. Then she threw two grenades into the house, and we hightailed it out of there. Met up with the rest of the team about a quarter mile south of the location. In all, we'd lost both CIA operatives, two Marines, and a contractor. Everyone was rattled. Scared shitless is more like it."

Carella: "Were you free and clear?"

Bruno: "Far from it. We'd paused for something like five minutes, and we were already taking random sniper shots. There were so many damn cave networks it was practically impossible to know where the enemy was at all times. We radioed in the call for our pickup, and we headed toward our rendezvous point."

Carella: "You didn't get there?"

Bruno: "We weren't a tight team. Probably by design. Looking back, I think the CIA picked guys who weren't exactly stable. Yes, I'm including me in that lot. I know I've had some issues over the years. That was the worst thing for me."

Another puff of breath.

Carella stayed silent, and then Bruno continued: "Maybe our issues gave us an edge in combat, but with no real leaders, dead people all around us, guys started to lose it."

Carella: "How?"

Bruno: "Couple of them traded punches. One of the contractors pulled out a knife and threatened Beck. Margaret put a gun to the contractor's head, and he put the knife away. It just got worse from there. We were getting loud, out of control. It was strange...without any real discussion, the contractors grabbed their stuff and took off in a different direction, saying they'd survive better on their own."

Carella: "That left, what, six of you?"

Bruno: "We started taking fire, so we got the hell out of there. The terrain sucked. Potholes, rocks, caves everywhere. Couldn't be sure if the next step might trigger some type of booby-trap bomb. But we didn't stop moving..."

well, until we came upon another militia group. Think we'd interrupted some type of drug-smuggling deal between a couple of tribes. We had to change direction. Broke through a thicket of trees into a clearing and ran like hell. Think we covered about three miles over the next couple of hours. Then we came upon a small village. No more than twenty, thirty people. Very nice people. They were happy to see us. We all felt a sense of relief."

Silence again, until we heard a high-pitched keening.

Bruno: "Oh my God, I still can't believe it. I don't want to believe it."

Carella: "Tell me."

The lawyer: "Bruno, I must interject here and advise you not to say anything further. You releasing your demons will only damage your reputation and could get you into more trouble."

A few snuffles.

Bruno: "I don't care anymore. I just can't keep up the lie."

The lawyer: "Bruno, do not say—"

A loud thud. I think Bruno had pounded his fist.

Bruno: "I don't work for you. You're not my CO. Shut the fuck up."

A few seconds of labored breathing.

Bruno: "One of the villagers had alcohol, and all of us on the team got drunk. Really drunk. Well, all but one. Beck. He was out doing recon. When he came back, we were all dancing, thinking we were going to get picked up in the next couple of hours. But when Beck got back, he said he found at least four hundred militia set up in two different places preparing to raid the village. That's when shit turned upside down."

Carella: "What do you mean?"

Bruno: "We all thought we were going to die. No. We knew it. Then, in another room, one of the guys, Doug Schuler, caught Margaret by surprise, and he tried to...rape her. We caught him in the middle of it all. She was beaten, bruised, tied up. We got him off her and tried to help her. But she fucking lost it. She..."

Carella: "What did Margaret do?"

Bruno after an audible sigh: "Shit, I can't believe I'm saying this. But she put a gun to Doug's head and made each one of us have sex with her."

Carella: "What? Why?"

Bruno: "It was the sickest thing I'd ever seen, ever been a part of. I think she really just lost it. Beck is the only one who refused, no matter how much she yelled at him or threatened to kill Doug. She pulled the trigger, and Doug cried out, but the gun didn't fire. She then started laughing, and it went on for fifteen, twenty minutes. It was twisted. We knew she'd lost it."

Carella: "Okay. After that, what happened?"

Bruno: "She left the room, then came back in, dragging one of the villagers. She was convinced they'd ratted on us. She shot him in the head. Then she rounded up all the others and put them in a room. She forced each one of us to kill three or four people. She killed the rest."

I nudged Archie's shoulder, and he just shook his head, refusing to look at me. Two hawks screeched, and I watched them soar across the park as wind slapped against my face. I tried to swallow, but there was no moisture left in my mouth.

Carella came back on the phone. "Can you believe that shit?"

"I've never heard of any case like this...any person like this in my life. How about you, Archie?"

The CIA agent finally glanced up at me, the exposed sun over my shoulder now causing him to squint. He looked back down and muttered, "Never."

"Alex, what the hell is next?" Carella asked emphatically.

I thought that one over until my feet hit the ground. Then I had to make an educated guess.

I punched in a group text to the team back in Boston: *Circling Baltimore. Got anything for me?*

“Gotta know whether to take the last exit for downtown Baltimore, Alex,” Archie said, fidgeting in the driver’s seat. He shifted the rearview and checked his blind spot twice, then started edging the muscle car into the right-hand lane. “Alex. We’ve got three seconds. Two, one...”

“Nothing. Keep going.”

He snapped the wheel back into the center lane, slamming my bandaged shoulder into the door.

“Dammit, Archie.” I gripped my shoulder while biting into my cheek, trying to defer the pain to another part of my body.

“This sucker can really perform. Must take one of those blue pills,” he said with a wry smile.

“Back at the gas station I thought I saw you pulling something out of your pocket and putting it in the gas tank.” I showed my teeth, then glanced back at the phone. Nothing.

“Just call them. It’s been another hour.”

“They said they’d call when they had something solid on Turov. I’ve got to trust them.”

In reality, I was on pins and needles. I couldn’t go two minutes without staring at my phone, holding it like it held the secret to the location of the fountain of youth.

The yellow glow of streetlights passed overhead every couple of seconds. We were motoring east on I-695, heading for I-95 South. Archie weaved through Saturday evening traffic, the wide set of tires gripping the dry road flawlessly. The car was obnoxious, but it had served a purpose—getting us from point A, Hershey, to point B, our exact destination unknown.

Back in Chocolate City, USA, I knew we couldn’t sit around, work a crime scene, and wait for a verification of the obvious.

Turov had killed Beck. Who was next on her list? We had studied a map on my phone while standing next to the bumblebee sports car. Lewisburg, Cobb’s penitentiary home for the time being, sat to our north; Pittsburgh about the same distance west. But my eyes gravitated south, knowing that the East Coast had the most people and drew the most eyes. While it appeared Turov had a specific list of people she intended to kill, she also seemed all too aware of the impact she’d made on those who chased her. The CIA, FBI, and countless local police departments.

And me. Her latest dance move was leaving notes that she knew I’d read. Was there anything more to the notes than a psycho getting her jollies? Who knew, but I couldn’t ignore my gut. I had told Archie to head south toward

DC.

“Why DC?” he asked.

“It’s the biggest stage. If you take out the side step to Hershey, she’s moving in a southerly direction.”

My impatience got the better of me, and I quickly phoned the team back in Boston, where Nick picked up the call to the war room.

“I’m going stir crazy, Alex. I’m not used to being cooped up in an office for days, nights in a row. I need to be in the field, dammit.”

I offered my condolences for his professional challenge, knowing there was no way in hell I’d be able to survive being held hostage inside an office for so long. We quickly segued into a team debrief on the Beck crime scene and our next steps. Specifically, I was hoping that they’d been able to pick up Turov’s trail or even a hint of who might be on her target list. Nick could only say that Jerry had gotten involved—which wasn’t always a good sign because he had a tendency to steer the investigation from his own emotional perspective—and Jerry had gone off to make a phone call.

For Nick, Brad, and Gretchen, I offered my own insight. I told them we were taking a chance by traveling in a direction where Turov hadn’t committed a crime. It went against all of our training, but even Archie admitted we had no choice. We had to make some type of proactive move, and maybe we’d get lucky. To me, luck was the intersection of hard work and persistence. My team, therefore, was due a strong dose of luck.

“Since Turov went after Beck, logic would say she’d go after the four other guys who participated in the mission. Figure out who they are and find them,” I said. “But that still might not be our ticket. So don’t limit your scope to just the four men. Remember, she killed a used car salesman. Anyone is fair game in her mind if they ever crossed her.”

After ending the call, I let the recurring strum of the tires on pavement take my thoughts back to the amusement park, where I imagined Sam Beck’s last living moments. For a reason I couldn’t comprehend, she killed the one guy who refused to cross the line with her on the other side of the planet. In return, she’d gutted him, creating the same type of twisted vignette that had become her calling card. Similar to the ring killings. Outside of using Cobb as her killing patsy, both sets of murders had a common denominator: the victims had been used as cadaver props to elicit the most anguish and the most humiliation—on the victims and on the law enforcement agencies in pursuit of the killer, as cold as the trail appeared at times.

But it had become rather obvious, at least part of the reason, why Turov had gone on this killing spree. PTSD, one of the most hidden yet pervasive conditions caused by trauma, usually associated with war combat. And from what Bruno described, their experience took that to the extreme, at least partially because of the people involved.

What did Bruno say? He suspected they were chosen for the covert op because they each had issues. Send the crazies in to do the dirty work. The

work no one else could do, or would do.

I glanced over at my joint task force partner.

“What?”

“You know what.”

He scratched the side of his head like he had fleas. I think it was more about trying to fluff out the ring on his perm from the fire hat. “For the hundredth time, Alex. I didn’t know dick about what happened on that operation in Afghanistan.”

I shook my head, unable to completely believe his line of bullshit.

“You admit the CIA is covering up that this mission ever occurred? I mean, that’s why you and your Langley buddies are trying to find Turov before anyone else does. Right?”

He let out a frustrated gasp and hit the steering wheel with an open hand. “What do you want me to say, Alex? I didn’t know anything about it. Hearing Carella’s recording...it was the sickest, most disturbing thing I’ve ever heard. But I only know one thing: war is not pretty. Movies don’t do it justice. It brings out the worst in people. Putting all that back in a bag when you come home...well, it’s not easy for anyone.”

Grabbing a bottle of water from the center console, I took two quick gulps. I had no desire to debate the merits of honesty and transparency in an intelligence agency. I wasn’t naïve. Deception was part of the game, and I was certain the FBI could teach a course on it. The CIA, however, didn’t appear to understand the term collaboration. We were supposed to be on the same team—to protect the public from sickos, whether they were born and bred within the United States, or had traveled to our fair land with that intent.

I shot another glance at Archie. With an arm propped against the window, he pressed against his temple, as if he were fending off a migraine. When we last worked together, he mentioned something about being stationed in Afghanistan. Perhaps he had witnessed some crazy shit as well. Or was actually in the middle of it.

“Anything?” he asked, nodding at my phone.

“Nothing. Ughh. I’m not sure how much longer I can hold out. I just hope I didn’t guess wrong.”

We moved south on I-95, passing green and white signs imprinted with towns named Columbia, Jessup, and Laurel.

“Beltway is just two miles ahead,” Archie said with an arched eyebrow.

I gave him a tight-lipped nod. Archie was referring to the I-495 loop around DC and the surrounding cities in the area. I could sense self-doubt creeping into the back of my mind. Perhaps I’d acted too hastily. Nothing said Turov couldn’t have headed west to Duluth, or even Denver, or any number of cities. Maybe following the rulebook was why they made the book anyway. The “maybe this/maybe that” theories flooded my brain, and in seconds, my eye sockets felt like they were being pounded from the inside out.

“Dammit.” I squeezed the phone while propping my elbow against the

window, the blur of pine trees and one-story buildings keeping my mind occupied for a moment.

The phone vibrated and rang. Infused with a shot of adrenaline, I looked at Archie and punched up the call, putting it on speakerphone.

“Nick, tell me you got something.”

I only heard mumblings of agitated voices.

“Nick?”

“Alex, Brad here. Hold on. Nick’s just running in from Jerry’s office.”

“Jerry found something,” Nick said.

I could hear the clip of Nick’s dress shoes and then his heavy breath.

“Here it is,” he said.

“Cool. What is it?” I asked.

“The...” He puffed three more times. “Dammit, I’ve got to get back into shape. The address to Margaret’s CIA-assigned psychiatrist.”

“East or west on 495?” Archie spit out.

“It’s in Silver Spring, Maryland. So west on 495, then south on Blair Road.”

Archie gunned it.

“Got a name?” I asked.

“Dr. James Teague. Been treating Turov at least once a quarter for more than ten years.”

The sports car leaned to the right.

“Have you tried contacting the good doctor?”

Nick said, “Jerry called him from his office. Didn’t pick up, but he left a voicemail.”

Archie and I traded stares.

“How the hell did Jerry get this name? Is the CIA finally giving us some professional courtesy?”

“Shit no. He contacted someone he went to school with. Said he owed him a favor.”

Archie smacked the dashboard. “So we got this information illegally?” He glared at me.

I jumped in before my team could respond. “You’re kidding me, right? We use every means possible to share information, figure out Turov’s location, what kind of crazy motive she might have. Nothing but lies and deception from the CIA. And now we know why. It’s one big-ass cover-up. I just haven’t decided if you’re part of it, or just another pawn in the CIA game.”

His eyes sparked with anger, and he said, “Screw you, Alex.”

I rolled my eyes and turned away, only to find the backside of an eighteen-wheeler almost on top of us. I slammed my foot on the floorboard and screamed, “Look out!”

Archie jammed the brakes and jerked the car right. We fishtailed into the left lane, causing a minivan to swerve out of the way. The driver laid on the

horn and flipped us off as Archie finally gained control.

He glanced at me, and we both smirked.

“You guys still with us?” Brad asked.

My chest lifted in a quick cadence. “Yes. We’re good. How far are we from Teague’s house?”

“We’re tracking your cell phone. Looks like you’re about five minutes out.”

I pulled my Glock from my purse and checked my ammo.

“Damn, Alex,” Archie said with rigid shadows flashing across his face.

“You think this is the final showdown or something?”

I had a feeling.

Sweat drained down from her white coif and onto her face, mixed with saliva and a bit of blood, and then dripped into the swollen eye of Dr. James Teague. Seething like a wild dog that had just been branded, Margaret Turov huddled over her longtime psychiatrist—counselor and confidante for many years. Someone she might have called a friend.

Until he betrayed her.

“You fucking told them everything about me. You told them I was an animal, a danger to society. A danger to myself. What kind of friend does that?” She ripped off her garment’s white headpiece and threw it to the side.

Leaning awkwardly against the turquoise wall in his living room, Teague lifted his hand and tried to point at her.

“What? Just say it,” she barked, surveying the damage she’d already inflicted.

“I...I only told them...” He paused and released a guttural, painful sound as he clenched his side.

“Yeah?” She tapped the end of her blade on the top of his head, and he blinked rapidly. “I don’t have all day. We’ve got a murder to finish here.”

He began to tremble, and his pained stare made her feel uncomfortable.

“I gave you the chance, so if you’re not going to take this opportunity to get it all out, we can just—”

“No, no,” he said, then squeezed his eyelids shut as he gulped. He glanced at the most significant wound on his body, at his side, where three fingers had no chance to plug the jagged gap.

“Go on, Doc.”

“Dammit, I had to share my notes with them. They paid me. It was part of my job. But that wasn’t the most important reason. Margaret, I truly wanted you to get help.”

“Help? Isn’t that what you were for?”

“No...well, kind of, yes. But you needed to be hospitalized.”

“Are you saying I’m certifiable?” Standing the tip of the blade on his chest, she brought up her other hand and slammed it downward, purposely

whiffing past the knife.

He cried out in pain. Or was it mental anguish? “Oh, Margaret,” he said with little energy, his ability to inflate his lungs nearly impossible. “Don’t scare me like that. Can’t you see that I only wanted what was best for you? Still do.”

“You, sitting here on your floor, minus one ear, with a black eye and other assorted wounds, want what is best for me?”

She then felt something loose in her mouth. Nudging it with her tongue, she spit out a tooth.

“Damn, Doc. I gotta hand it to you. I’ve been in more scrapes than a homeless dog, but you’re the first one who knocked out a tooth. Congrats.”

Teague’s bloodshot eyes shifted to Turov and then down to the floor.

Her lips turned upward at the corners, and she reached over and snatched the fireplace poker off the hardwood. “You’re just trying to waste more time. Maybe convince me to get you some water or a rag for your wound. Right? Then you would grab this poker here, hide it under your leg, and then slam it into what you might call my fucked-up brain. Unlike a few minutes ago when your wayward swing just happened to catch my tooth, you might get lucky and even take me out. A single kill shot.”

He choked and wheezed for a good twenty seconds, then managed to say, “No, Margaret. It’s not that way. I truly care about you. Couldn’t you tell all these years?”

Inspecting the poker closer, she watched a million images fly through her mind.

“I can see that you do remember, don’t you?”

Her eyes stayed transfixed on the poker as she recalled the many sessions in Dr. Teague’s office, sitting on his comfortable couch, a box of tissues on one side and two large pillows on the other. The doctor had called them her punching bags. Whenever she had aggressive feelings toward someone, she was to take it out on the pillows and then let the hostility drain from her body. It took her several sessions before she even contemplated his bizarre tactic. Finally, she relented. She was shocked to feel a difference. Less anxiety, fewer violent thoughts. She still had her moments, but for a while she thought she had her problem licked.

That was until she had a run-in with a person in a drive-thru. That didn’t end well.

“I’m a stand-up person. I’ll admit that you did a couple of things for me. But all along you were working for the CIA, feeding them every nugget of data you had on Margaret Turov.”

He coughed once more, wincing in pain. “I only did that to appease them, Margaret.”

“Appease. Really?”

A stiff nod. “It’s the truth, Margaret. I care about my patients. I’m not in this business to betray my patients. I’m here to help people.”

She glanced over to the foyer, wondering if she heard something. A single lamp arching over the doctor's reading chair illuminated the front part of the refurbished Tudor home. She knew there was a dog next door that would alert her if anyone set foot on Teague's property.

Certain she wouldn't be disturbed, she puffed out a breath and studied the situation. The good doctor had stated a fairly solid case. Like he had appeared all these years, he came across as sincere, authentic.

Bringing the poker to eye level, her arm brushed against the wooden beads that wrapped around her opposite wrist. Then her eyes followed the trail of blood to her veil and sleeves.

"At your core, Margaret, you are a good person. I knew that all along."

She skidded back a few feet, suddenly annoyed at his sales job. Good person? She'd never been called a good person.

"Dr. Teague, you had a chance."

Bewilderment etched deep trenches into his leathery face.

"But I truly believe it, Margaret. You just need a little help. We all do at one time in our lives."

She chuckled once, paused, and then snorted out another raucous round of laughter that caused her to fall to her back, the poker banging off the floor. "Whew! You're going to make me cry, Doc."

"I'm glad your opinion of my sincerity is so damn comical."

"I think you actually believe yourself. That's either pathetic or hilarious. For some reason, you got me right in the tickle box." Her laughter filled the room.

She finally picked herself up and rested the poker against the wall, just out of the doctor's reach.

She noticed his eyes listless, and she wondered if he'd finally retreated into an unconscious state.

"Dr. Teague, are you there?"

He took in a wheezy breath. "What do you want?"

"Just making sure you're still with us."

"Does it matter anyway?"

"Why, James, I thought all doctors cared ultimately about saving a life. Are you saying that you've given up all hope? Without hope, what do you really have?"

"All these years, I wondered what it was like to be on the receiving end of the rants of a homicidal maniac." He lifted his vision and stared right into her eyes. "And now I know."

A sense of melancholy tugged at her conscience. She realized it must be connected to the glimmer of hope she once held that she could leave all the horrific memories to the killing fields half a world away.

"You've done some good work in this world, Doc. Nothing to be ashamed of. But if you ever have to ask yourself why this is happening to you..." She glanced at her garb and then shot him a wink. "...then you just

need to remember three simple letters. The letters that represent you committing treason of the highest order.”

She grabbed her knife, wrapped both hands around the grip, and raised it above Teague.

“No, Margaret. Please. I’m begging you. There has to be a better way,” he cried out.

“Do you know those letters, Dr. Teague?”

“No, please!”

“The letters that will eat your soul. C-I-A.”

With every ounce of strength in her body, she thrust her arms down until they met a slight resistance. Teague’s lips quivered for a second, and then he gasped one final breath.

A dog barked just once. Looking over her shoulder with her knife hovering just above the body, she eyed the front door. Was it just an evening jogger or had someone finally chased her down?

Gritting her teeth, she fought against the primal urge to carve up the good doctor. A temporary feeling of euphoria would have to take a backseat to her long-term goal. Much work was still left to be accomplished.

The clip of shoes crunching across gravel ignited my pulse. I jumped, twisted ninety degrees in midair, and landed on the hollow front porch, steadying my Glock. At first, I only saw a long shadow. With my finger on the trigger, I waited for the first opportunity to fire my weapon and stop the killing machine, once and for all.

Another shadow, shorter and in spastic motion, seemed to be adjoined to the first shadow.

“Get the hell off me, dammit.” Archie hopped toward the front of the house.

I lowered my gun and tiptoed a few steps toward the edge of the porch, wondering if my eyes had deceived me. They hadn’t. The neighbor’s dog was humping Archie’s leg.

“Crap, Archie. I thought you were covering the back,” I said in a loud whisper.

I watched him bounce up and down while trying to shake the basset hound off his leg.

“I thought you were the dog whisperer, able to quiet the most aggressive dogs in the world.”

“I am. I shut him up when I first petted him, but he must have crawled under the fence when I left to go around back.”

“Looks like you have a friend for life.” The dog’s tiny legs had a firm grip on Archie.

“I just can’t—”

“Pull him off and get around back,” I said. “Hurry up.”

Archie peeled the paws off his leg and hightailed around back.

Cupping my hand against my face, I put my eyes to the stained glass, looking for some type of motion. Nothing I could see. With two hands still gripping the Glock, I inched over to a window that appeared to have a light on the other side. I tried to peek through a gap in the white shutters. I could only make out the top of an aqua-colored wall. The range of my vision was limited, so I kept searching for another crack. I found one, and it gave me a tiny view of floors—hardwoods.

Still searching, I found another crack.

“Is that a—” I was almost certain it was a man’s hand coated with blood. “Shit!”

I put my hand on the door. It was locked. Holding my gun by the barrel, I rammed the butt into the stained window, and the glass shattered all over the interior floor. I reached inside the opening, turned the deadbolt, and punched the door open.

A dead man, presumably Dr. Teague, was propped against the aqua wall in the living room. Two seconds later, the back door burst open, and Archie stumbled into the kitchen.

“What the hell, Archie?”

“I thought it was locked, but it wasn’t even shut all the way. I couldn’t see shit back there.”

“Get your ass over here.”

He jogged up the hallway and met me where I stood near the body. Dr. Teague’s eyes were open, but nothing more than a lifeless stare. Seeing that his ear had been cut off, I avoided the dried blood and touched his neck in several places, confirming no pulse.

It was rather obvious why he died. A massive wedge had been made in his chest, but I also noticed another wound just under his ribcage on the left side.

“The skin is clammy, but not overly cold. Skin color is a sallow yellow. I’m guessing he died in the last hour. Maybe more recently than that.”

“Crap.” Archie rubbed his face. “A little sooner and we might have been able to stop this one. Stop her.”

“Call it in to the locals, and let’s get the nearest FBI ERT here as soon as possible.”

As Archie put the phone to his ear, I continued talking. “Did you notice there isn’t the same type of vignette? He’s been stabbed, but I don’t see any body parts on display.”

“Are you saying you think Turov didn’t kill Teague?” Archie dropped the phone to his side.

“No. I don’t think so. I think she was in a rush.”

I let Archie finish his call as I walked the room, looking for anything that might give us a clue as to what might be Turov’s next move.

I circled the couch and came up at a different angle. “Not sure how I

missed this.” Crouching, I eyed a fireplace poker propped against the wall about six feet from Teague’s outstretched hand.

“No obvious sign of it being used on Teague,” Archie said, shuffling around the body.

“Wonder if Teague surprised her for a change?” I scanned the room, and everything pretty much looked in order. An ottoman was shoved on its side, magazines strewn on the floor. But all the blood and gore appeared to be contained in about a ten-square-foot area.

Crack.

Archie stopped in his tracks. “I just stepped on something, dammit.”

“It’s always good to crush the evidence before we have a chance to inspect it.”

“Thanks.” He lifted his heel, and I spotted something white.

I nearly touched the floor with my chin. “Looks like a tooth.”

He scooted out of the way. “Do you think it’s the doctor’s or could it be from Turov?”

I eyed the doctor and didn’t see any obvious bruising around his jawline.

Sirens echoed in the distance, and I drifted across the hall toward another room. “Why don’t you flip on the lights and meet the paramedics and cops out front?”

Archie tiptoed through the broken glass and stepped onto the front porch as I surveyed what appeared to be the doctor’s office. It was an active crime scene, so anything in my sights was fair game. A laptop sat on top of his desk. I moved the mouse, and a password prompt lit up the screen.

“Need to get this to Quantico,” I said to myself, knowing I’d have little hope of cracking the security on the laptop. Two framed degrees hung from the wall, one from the University of Virginia and the other from Virginia Commonwealth. I moved to my right and came upon a set of built-in bookshelves. They were stuffed full of books and notebooks with paper sticking out. Most of the books appeared to be about human behavior and relationships. I also spotted two Stephen King novels.

My foot accidentally backed into something metal. “What do we have here?” It was an actual filing cabinet. I pulled open the drawer and searched for the file for names beginning with T.

“What are you doing, Alex?”

I flipped my head and found Archie at the entry into the office as a throng of first responders spilled in through the doorway behind him.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I still had a hand on the open drawer.

“Don’t we need a search warrant to look through those files?”

I could feel my face turning red in about two seconds. “Would you be asking that if Teague wasn’t working for the CIA?”

He twisted his lips and rocked side to side. “Dammit, Alex. My bosses think I’m helping to run this joint task force with you.”

“And you think that gives you the authority to ignore evidence that could give us more insight into this homicidal maniac?”

Archie stomped into the room, a single blue vein snaking down his forehead. I’d never seen him so stressed. “Okay, let me help you then. If I’m going to get fired, I might as well do it while we’re working together to stop a cold-blooded killer.”

I kept my mouth shut, and we dove into the files.

"I'm sucking fumes, Alex. Need to pull over." Archie dug his fist into his eye. When he was done, it appeared he'd been in a fight with a couple of hornets.

"CIA can't keep up?"

"Every chance you get, you just keep bustin' my balls. Is that the way it's always going to be?"

"Until we catch a killer that the CIA knew about all along, yes."

To keep myself from lashing out, verbally or otherwise, I turned to gaze out the window and spotted an apron of early-morning fog hovering about four feet off the ground in a nearby field. Two cows slumbered, their heads nearly touching. I heard the clinking of the blinker as Archie slowed the muscle car to a slow grumble and turned right into a gas station.

"You and the bumblebee beast are sucking fumes, huh?"

"Eh," he muttered, crawling out of the car. "You want anything from inside?"

"I just want to stretch my body right now."

I got out and was immediately met with the familiar smell of gasoline.

I glanced east and saw pink and purple rippled clouds, the sun just now rising behind the largest Catholic church in the world, so the sign had said a mile back. I let my mind wander for a moment, trying to recall my youth, when my mom was alive. From what Mark had told me, and my father had reluctantly verified, she was a religious fanatic. While a good part of my memory had come back to me, I'd only had a few quick images flash through my mind of the time before Mom was killed in a car crash. One such clip continued to replay itself, pinging my brain when I least expected—like now. I could recall her holding a rosary, rocking to and fro, chanting something indecipherable while staring at a cross in our living room. I'd tried talking to my dad about it on the phone, but he wasn't much of a phone talker.

"You wondering if our little nun might have gone to confessional at the big Catholic church across the way?" Archie said, walking up behind me.

"Funny."

He was referring to the fact that a set of nun's clothing, smeared with blood, had been found by a local police officer behind a shed in Teague's backyard, all while Archie and I pored through manila folders searching for notes or reports on the doctor's counseling sessions with Turov.

We'd made the assumption that Margaret had donned the disguise to lure her way into Dr. Teague's home. Since the ME's office confirmed none of Teague's teeth were missing, we assumed he'd put up at least some resistance. Perhaps he'd whacked Turov in the jaw with the poker. No sooner had I thrown out that theory, then Archie chimed in. "So, Professor Plum was killed in the library with the candlestick," he said with a single chortle. "But does

that give us any great insight? We're still fairly certain that Miss Scarlett—Turov—committed the crime."

He had a point. "If her jaw hurts bad enough, or gets infected, she might seek care from an oral surgeon." I shook my head the moment the words spilled out. "Nope. Think about it. She's been to hell and back in combat. Losing her tooth probably meant nothing more than being bitten by a mosquito."

Archie pulled the gas pump from the car, then faced me from the driver's side, his elbows leaning on the rooftop as he slurped his coffee. "Boy, that's hot."

I checked the time on my phone, then thumbed over to the picture I'd taken of Margaret's last note.

"You wondering why she took the time to write the note if we were that close to catching her?" Archie had snuck up next to me, and my weary heart almost popped through my sternum.

"Shit, Archie. You scared the crap out of me." I glanced at him.

He just stood there and bobbed his head, taking another slurp of his coffee, then cramming half a jelly donut into his gaping maw.

With a pained expression on my face, I pointed at the corner of my mouth. "You got a little something."

"Oh." He used his tongue to lather up all the food remnants.

"Gross, Archie. The less sleep you get, the more uncouth you get."

He held his donut so close I could have taken a bite. But that was the last thing I needed, or wanted.

"Well, the less sleep you get, the more of a bitch you become."

I shook my head. "Okay. We're even on that front."

He bobbed, then he winked and stuffed another bite into his mouth before he'd finished chewing the first one.

I had to turn my vision, so I stared at the picture of Turov's last message: *Close, but no cigar, AT. Blood rules...MT*

"Was this her way of telling me she was playing by her own set of rules? Blood rules," I said as much to myself as to Archie.

I tapped the phone in my hand as I scanned the blur of the colorful horizon, a layer of ozone clinging to buildings at the north side of Washington, DC.

"I think she might..." He paused and wiped his mouth with an open hand. "She might be just playing games. Anything to get us running one way, while she's moving another."

I blew out a breath, and steam pumped into the sky. "It's possible. I just know we came within minutes of catching her. Just a few minutes."

I opened the car door and pulled out the stuffed folder, setting it on the hood. Earlier in the doctor's office as crime scene investigators milled about the home and the property, Archie and I riffled through mounds of files and papers, and we came up empty—on the first filing cabinet. We weren't about

to give up. We expanded our search and found another filing cabinet in the office closet, camouflaged by jackets. It also had a lock on it. Without either of us saying a word, Archie left the room and came back with a pair of long-handled bolt cutters.

“No one asked you what you needed these for?”

“No. Never do. I just say it’s CIA business, and they scatter like I’ve got an STD.” He lifted his head and smiled. “What can I say? I like to make fun of myself sometimes.”

“Self-deprecating humor. I’m on board with that, especially when you’re the one talking,” I said, gesturing for him to get to work.

One flick of his wrist and the ripped metal from the padlock fell to the floor. That was when we sat down on the floor of the closet and began to sift and read. We found case reports on Margaret almost immediately, but the content was mundane. Nothing sensational or telling.

Almost two hours into the effort, I lifted a finger in the air and said, “You won’t believe this shit, Archie.” While it wasn’t a list of all the people she intended to kill after losing her rocker, I’d found, perhaps, the trigger event that turned Margaret into the killing machine we knew.

In so many words, Margaret revealed that when she was a teenager, she was a bit of an outsider. One Saturday night she found out about a big party and decided this would be her turn to break free and make her social introduction to the rest of the teenage world. But it didn’t go well. A number of boys made fun of her, calling her, “A butch and bitch. The double B.”

The doctor’s notes documented that the boys were relentless, and she felt tremendous embarrassment and humiliation. She ran out of the house after the boys had ripped her clothes to expose her boy-like body. While all of that was alarming, it wasn’t the headline, not by a long shot. Later that school year, a boy went missing—the same one who’d led the hazing. He was found hanging off a remote bridge a hundred miles away. Teague had circled a quote from Margaret: “I made him pay for disgracing me. It’s like someone took over my body, and I just did what I had to do to protect myself. I gotta admit, though, killing him made me tingle inside.”

Archie pointed at the file on the hood. “We read every word at least twice,” he said, smacking his lips on the last bite of his donut. “I don’t think reading it again will shine a light on where she is right now.”

Ignoring him as much as any human could, I drowned out his obnoxious sounds.

“Don’t we need to get moving?” he asked as I scanned each page before flipping it over and moving on to the next.

I’d skimmed through half the packet, then I placed my finger at the center of the next page.

“I don’t recall reading this.”

Archie craned his neck. “I guess I read through that one.”

The report seemed innocuous on the surface—Margaret talking about

what her interests were when she was growing up.

I held up the page and read the passage from the doctor's notes. "While Margaret isn't academically inclined in math, physics, or chemistry, or even literature, she does possess an interest in political science. One day, she might aspire to run for local office. Then again, given her past, I doubt this is a realistic goal. But seeing her show a genuine interest in a normal area of work is a positive sign. She's beginning to show us a beacon of hope—that she can actually function in society without diverting to the violent tendencies of her past."

"What's the date on that report?" Archie asked.

I looked to the corner of the page. "About six months ago," I said.

We traded stares, and then turned our gaze south. On the horizon, the sun peeked through clouds to illuminate downtown DC. I think I made out the top of the capital. Neither of us spoke for a good minute, perhaps wondering if the other would actually say it: the chase for the killing machine had taken us to the edge of the biggest political arena in the country, possibly, the world. Maybe finding the doctor's notes about Turov's sincere interest in politics was coincidental.

My growling stomach interrupted the silence. I closed the folder and stuffed it under Archie's elbow. "I can't hold out any longer. I need my caffeine, and I'm hungry."

I padded away as a diesel truck lumbered into the lot and squealed to a stop. A man wearing a ski hat with the Redskins logo on it jumped out, pulled open the gate on the back of his truck, and yanked out a bundle of newspapers. I held the door for him.

"Thanks, lady," he said.

"No problem."

I made a beeline toward the coffee station, nodding at the man behind the counter wearing an orange and yellow shirt, matching the same colors of the station's company logo.

"Just brewed a new pot. Your partner out there got the crap coffee. You get the fresh stuff," the pudgy man said before unleashing a wet cough.

I poured my coffee, added some cream and two sugars, then picked up an orange and one of those breakfast bars with lots of nuts and antioxidants and made my way to the counter.

"Can you believe this shit?" The attendant lifted the newspaper and jabbed a finger into it as he spoke to the vendor who was filling the rack, half paying attention, it appeared.

I stood at the counter, savoring my first swallow of the dark roast coffee. "Just what the doctor ordered," I said to myself.

When the attendant didn't get a response from his vendor, he turned to me. "Can you believe this shit?"

"I heard you the first time."

The vendor came over to the counter and readjusted the Velcro on his

back brace. “Sorry I’m running so late today. They had a late deadline and all. I guess you know why now.” He winked at the attendant and me. “See you tomorrow,” he said, waving a hand as he scampered out the door.

“Later,” the attendant said, swinging back around to face me. He dropped the paper on the counter.

I peeled the wrapper off the breakfast bar and turned the paper so I could read the headline: *Sex Scandal Rocks the Capitol*.

Then I saw the sub-header: *Idaho Senator Blames Devil for His Actions*.

My jaw stopped chewing, and I shot my head up and found Archie casually leaning against the car, eating another donut. Where the hell did that one come from?

“How much do I owe you?” I asked in rapid fire.

“Okay, we got the coffee.” He punched the register three times, then he looked at me. “I need the wrapper. To scan it.”

I pulled off the rest of the wrapper and handed it to him as I took another bite of the breakfast bar. The register dinged and he said, “That will be four twenty-seven.”

“What about the paper? Did you include that?”

He picked up his scanner and hovered the red laser over the paper’s barcode. “Six forty-eight.”

“That paper cost two bucks?” I said, swiping my credit card.

“Eh. It’s a dying industry. I guess they’re thinking only suckers are buying papers now.”

“Thanks,” I said with a roll of my eyes. I punched the door open. The newspaper truck was pulling out of the parking lot as I marched over to the car and slid the paper across the top over to Archie.

“Don’t tell me. Political gridlock?” His eyes found the headlines, and then he peeked up at me.

“Are you—”

“Drive,” I said, opening the door and sitting in the front seat. He got behind the wheel and turned the ignition.

“Where to?”

I tapped my phone, and it started ringing on the other end. I looked over at Archie and pointed straight ahead. “Head to the Capitol.”

“Alex?” A groggy Nick picked up the line. “We all fell asleep on the tables here in the war room. Sorry.”

“No problem. Fill me in on your progress later. Where’s Jerry?”

“Went home.”

“Home?”

“He told me to call him if we picked up her trail. Want me to bring him into this call?”

“Sure.”

Archie had paused at the exit to the parking lot. “What are you waiting on?” I tapped the center console impatiently.

“You really think we should be going to the Capitol? It’s Sunday anyway,” Archie said.

“This is Jerry. What’s up?” he said with little enthusiasm.

“Go to the Capitol, dammit,” I told Archie.

Archie burned rubber, fishtailing the muscle car onto the road.

“Capitol? Why are you guys headed to the Capitol?” It didn’t take long to get my SSA’s attention.

I grabbed the dash, feeling like I was riding a bull. “Jerry, I’m almost certain I know Turov’s next and maybe her final target. But I’m going to need you to clear some hurdles.”

“Oh boy. Am I going to do something that will get me fired?”

“Call the Secret Service. She’s going after a senator.”

As I stood with my arms crossed in a second-floor hallway of the mostly uninhabited Russell Senate Office Building, watching grown men argue like petulant children, I quickly learned what DC gridlock was all about. Even in the middle of a scandal and a very real threat on the life of a US senator.

An Ivy Leaguer adjusted his designer glasses, one hand in the pocket of his Burberry gray suit. He stepped outside an office door into the hallway, swapping places with the senator's chief of staff, Andre Sherman, who'd been pleading his case with the Secret Service and Capitol Police.

"I've heard both sides of the debate, and this is what's going to happen. First, Mr. Gusset is going to finish his diligent work for the people of the great state of Idaho. Second, he's going to walk his wife out to the front of the Russell Building and get into a car. And third, they're going to church so he can atone for his sins. Is that clear to everyone?"

"You are?" A bald Secret Service official, whose body appeared to have been chiseled from steel, spoke with a penetrating baritone. Flanked by two others who had similar builds, Wesley Hubbard held up a single finger that appeared to have been broken several times.

"Chad. Chad Levine. CEO of Levine PR Strategy."

"Mr. Levine, as director of the Secret Service, we're offering to protect the senator. This is not part of our normal scope of duties. We wouldn't be providing this offer if we didn't believe there was a strong case that he is in danger."

"What case? You mean this excuse for how the CIA and FBI have fucked up their investigation of this bizarre series of killings up the East Coast?"

I stepped forward and broke up the stag party. "I don't mean to pry, but I've seen what this person can do. The senator is a prime candidate to be a target. And if she gets hold of him, we won't recognize him when she's done. Is that clear?" I put a little attitude on the final question.

Chad gave a smug shake of his head. "This is exactly my point. I have sources who tell me that the CIA and FBI have both known about this criminal for some time. She most likely worked for one or both agencies. No offense..."

"Troutt. Special Agent Troutt," I said through gritted teeth, my hands curling into fists.

"Right. Troutt, I'm sure you're just a mouthpiece for this so-called joint task force. A fancy name for a farce. That's what it is. It's a farce."

I wanted to punch the asshole right in the mouth.

Everyone started piling into the conversation, including two representatives from Capitol Police. Everyone but Archie. I glanced over my

shoulder and saw him standing there, his hands clasped in front of his body, his eyes straight ahead.

Seeing the dysfunctional group interact, I was left with only one option. I tapped my phone three times, found the picture of Karina in Brighton Beach, and then held up my phone in the center of the group.

"I shouldn't be doing this—these are classified photos—but I think you should understand the risk of not putting Senator Gusset into protective custody."

The heated discussion quickly died back, and everyone positioned themselves to see the photo.

"If you don't like that one, maybe this one will do it for you." I swooshed my thumb left and brought up an image of Monty.

Every man there flinched at the sight of each photo, their faces instantly hardened with horror and bewilderment.

"I have more I can show you..."

"No, no," several said.

Levine pulled a black and white polka-dot handkerchief from his breast pocket and blotted his forehead. "Dear Jesus," he said while gasping for air, then he turned his back.

I scanned the group as I spoke. "Now I realize the Secret Service will be on point for this detail. Only those who need to know the senator's whereabouts will know." I turned to Hubbard. "I'm assuming you'll keep me and my CIA counterpart in the loop."

He nodded and then said, "And I'm sure you will offer the same professional courtesy, particularly if you gain knowledge of an imminent threat."

The office door opened and out stepped a man in his late fifties, hair perfectly coifed, dark circles under his eyes. He looked as tired as I was.

"I'm only going to say this once," he said calmly, pausing his gaze on each of us for a quick second. "There will be no Secret Service detail assigned to watch after me. I'm a grown man who can take care of himself."

I bit into my cheek, summoning every ounce of discipline to not interrupt the seasoned politician.

"I know everyone here thinks they can dictate my life just because I draw a government paycheck. Unless I fell asleep and woke up in the Soviet Union in 1975, my freedom is my own." He smacked one hand into the other as his intensity increased. "I have work to do for the people I serve. And no bimbo who's trying to entrap me, or a murdering lunatic, is going to divert my attention from doing what is best for this country, what is best for Idahoans."

"Sir." A short, young staffer stuck his head around the side of the taller senator. He received an ominous glare from his boss, but I'm not sure he noticed. "Technically, there were two bimbos, right? I mean, you would know, uh, since you...were there."

The senator's lip parted, showing off a set of choppers that would put

Dracula to shame. He ignored the kid and turned back to the adults that he thought he could manipulate. "This will be the last time this item will be discussed. And I would like everyone to acknowledge that none of this will leak to the press."

A few head nods, and I grudgingly followed suit.

"Emma, it's time for us to leave for church, dear."

The door squeaked open, but no one appeared.

"Dear?"

Leaning to my right, I peered into the office and spotted an old campaign sign framed on the wall. It read: *Vote for Gusset and Sell More Russets!*

Potatoes. I wondered if he'd changed his name just to appeal to the voters.

A moment later, a stately woman wearing a gray and pink suit exited the room. She was attractive, young looking, but she wore a forced smile. Who wouldn't?

"I'm ready," she declared.

"Good day," the senator said to the group, and then he walked away with his wife by his side. I saw him reach for his wife's hand, but she pulled away. His minions followed behind. I thought I heard Levine on the phone talking to a member of the press.

As the others around me just stood there, dumbfounded with what they should say or do, I walked to the window. A horde of media paraded outside. A minute later, Ralph and Emma Gusset waded through the photographers and reporters on their way to a waiting car at the curb. Now they were arm in arm, and she glanced at her husband several times with a look of staunch support and forgiveness.

"Oh brother," I said, noticing Archie's reflection in the window.

"He thinks he's made of Teflon," Archie said with a smirk. "I'm sure he believes he can convince the world that he's really a great guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. You heard him; he thinks the bimbo was trying to set him up."

"You mean bimbos. As in two." I shook my head.

He chuckled as we continued watching the scene down below.

"Yep, he's got his swag back. He's probably thinking that he's immune to everything, including evil. And we know that Turov won't go after him because he's actually a great person, a real benefit to society."

"That's her MO, all right," Archie deadpanned. He turned and leaned against the windowsill while wiping his face. "You think we ought to pack up and go home?"

"Not by a long shot. Turov is in DC, I know it. She's waiting for the right time to pounce. But what I can't say with certainty is that her target is Senator Gusset. This city is swarming with debauchery. Or she could keep with her recent theme of going after someone who's done her wrong. Either way, it won't be long. She'll kill again and again until someone stops her."

Ten minutes later, we jumped on a debrief call with the team back in Boston.

A sudden gust of wind caught a woman's skirt in front of me, and she quickly flapped her hands down, but not before she flashed the others around me waiting for the walking sign to turn green. A couple of guys with large purses strapped across their chests giggled like little boys. I gave them a scowl, and then we all marched across the street. With shoes clipping the concrete like a herd of horses, I turned east to look at the Capitol, the rising sun behind it providing a halo effect.

It had been forty-eight hours since Archie and I had arrived in DC. Much to our dismay, all had been quiet. No sign of Turov and no murders with body parts set up for just the right visual impact. Part of me wondered if she'd purposely led us astray while she was eight states away, hunting down a former classmate or perhaps a convenience store clerk who might have looked at her wrong.

But the other part of me thought she was lying in the weeds, waiting to strike—at Senator Gusset or maybe another public figure. The idea of taking down a public figure just seemed too tempting for the persona I thought I understood.

Nick and team had confirmed that the obvious candidates for her next victim were no longer in the running. The former Marines from her life-defining mission, the Little Banditos, as it were, had all died several years back of natural causes.

Archie and I had each pushed our respective chains of command to try to force the senator to take on a protection detail. Not surprisingly, nothing changed. We were both told that they tried their best through internal contacts. When I asked why they didn't go public with their request, they simply brushed me off like I was part of the cleaning crew.

"Hold up," a cop said. The rest of the group and I came to a quick stop just as the next pedestrian crossing signal turned red.

While I'd been able to catch up on sleep and a bunch of FBI paperwork, I missed Erin and Luke terribly. We'd been able to hold four Skype video sessions. They were excited to talk to me and see me. They spent a lot of the time holding up Pumpkin to convince me he'd gained more weight. Luke held the cat like he was made of jelly. It made me laugh. While I couldn't tell them exactly when I'd be home, I told Nick and Jerry that I'd give it two more days. After that, they could find a local agent to take over the inevitable—waiting for Turov to strike again.

Last night after kissing the kids goodbye through our video call, I received another call within seconds. It was my dad, Donald Troutt. The former Coast Guard captain was in DC and wanted to have breakfast. I glanced at my watch and saw I was ten minutes late. A few butterflies danced

in my gut as I spotted Sammy's Diner one more block south on 7th Street Northwest.

Pausing for a moment just outside the diner, I took in a deep breath. Dad and I had spoken twice over the phone since my crash, but nothing in person. All the questions that had peppered my brain over the last couple of months now came back to my frontal lobe. I wasn't sure now was the time to bring them up. Frankly, I was a bit surprised I'd agreed to even meet him for breakfast. But I think I craved more than a plate full of greasy bacon. I longed to feel connected to family—my own and the one I left behind years ago.

Wearing his formal uniform with the top button undone, he was easy to spot. He waved, then diverted his eyes and took a pull on his coffee as I walked toward the booth. He appeared to forget to greet me until I spoke up.

"Dad?"

"Oh, Alexandra." He winced a bit as he pushed off the table and gave me a stiff hug and a kiss on the cheek. I could smell booze on his breath. His skin was blotchy and his eyes red.

I immediately regretted making the effort to meet him, but I settled into the booth. "How are you doing?"

He seemed to ponder the question, sipping his coffee and then setting the mug on the table, his hand jittering slightly. Annoyed, I glanced around the crowded restaurant. Lots of yuppies holding gadgets while wearing earbuds. Some of them laughed while others ate bagels and displayed serious looks as if they were piecing together groundbreaking legislation at that exact moment.

"Not fond of DC or being asked a ton of questions about some Coast Guard investigation from umpteen years ago, but I'm doing okay." His eyes met mine, and I could recall him looking forty years younger, when his smile came more naturally. Now, he looked sad, broken. "Kind of strange that we're both in DC, and not for the best of reasons, from what you shared last night."

I nodded, not wanting to relive the carnage and drama. A waitress arrived, and I decided to stick with healthy food. Ezzy had shared with me that Erin had been eating well while spending a lot of time working with an older friend on her tennis game. I played tennis when I was younger. I'd begun to recall some of that time period. But that wasn't the only part of my life still fuzzy.

"So we used to live not too far from here. Down the coast in Virginia Beach," I said.

"Yep." Leaning back, he brought the cup of coffee to his lips and took another drink. Almost as abrupt as his answer.

Crossing my arms, I looked into his eyes, crow's feet etched on both sides. His brooding expression matched his sagging position in the booth. I could picture him sitting in a metal outdoor chair on a back porch, his legs crossed, sipping his coffee, wearing a wifebeater. Maybe with a flask in his back pocket. Was that an actual memory?

"You and I sailed up the coast to the DC area one summer. I was looking

for one of those hidden inlets to fish. You wanted nothing of it. More interested in bouncing a ball. Ha.”

I paused for a second, then said, “Dad, I need to know more about my mother. My memory is coming back to me—”

“Good to hear.”

“I remember small snippets, and then sometimes my mind takes that clip and tries to expand on it. I really don’t know if I’m making it up or if it’s real.”

“We had some good times. She died way too young, that’s for sure.”

The waitress delivered the food, and Dad didn’t waste any time before plowing into his biscuits and gravy.

I forked a piece of cantaloupe and bit off half of it. “Before Mark died, he told me that Mom was extremely religious. Said it might be why I rebelled some.” I lifted my eyebrows, hoping he’d finish the thought.

He glanced at me, then eyed his plate as he continued eating. I told him about my recurring memory of Mom and the rosary.

“Do we really want to get into this?” Biscuit crumbs dropped to the table. He reached down and picked up each one and put them in his mouth.

“I lost my memory. Now it seems like I never had a family to recall.”

“Alexandra, we were a family. You and I. A hell of a team. You remember how you used to kick every boy’s ass in tennis? No one at your school, no one in the county could beat you.”

I pursed my lips, my psyche split between a little bit of pride and sadness that my own father wouldn’t give me the courtesy to tell me about my mother.

“Were you devastated when Mom died in the car crash?”

He downed half a glass of water, then used his napkin. “It’s behind me, Alexandra. Believe me, it’s best that way.”

I nodded, surveyed the diner, and glanced at a man in a suit and dreadlocks eyeing his tablet at the bar.

“But I understand why you’re curious. It’s natural.” He finally acknowledged me, how I felt. “That recurring thought you have, that’s real. Your mom was a bit obsessive. And she really grabbed hold of religion and never let go. It didn’t turn her into a very nice person. She was distant, in her own world most of the time. I’m sorry if that hurts you.”

“No,” I said quietly, as I clinked my spoon inside my cup of coffee. “It’s the truth. I need to hear it.”

He blew out a breath. “At times she spoke in tongues. Seemed overly paranoid. Just very difficult to get along with. And then she had the crash.”

“What happened after that?”

“We moved. I knew it was best for us to start anew. I asked for a transfer, and we ended up in Port Isabel. Did Mark ever tell you her crash is why you vowed to become a lawyer, specifically a prosecutor?”

“Holy shit. Really?”

He took a loud sip of his coffee and leaned back. “Yep. You said you

wanted to bring justice to those who commit crimes like vehicular homicide.”

“Did they catch the guy who killed Mom?”

“No. He got away.”

A scream off to the side. I turned as a waitress dropped her tray. Dishes cracked against the hard surface, splintering the low hum in the small restaurant. Lifting from my seat, I could hear Dad mumbling something, but I followed the waitress’s eyes as she looked over the man’s shoulder with the tablet.

“Isn’t that...Senator Gusset?” the waitress said, pointing at the screen, her thin shoulders moving up and down.

I pulled up next to her as Dreadlocks added, “What kind of crazy shit is this?”

The senator’s bruised face filled up the shaking screen, his mouth covered in duct tape. One eye was swollen shut, the other blinking from a trail of blood snaking down his forehead. The video widened to show Turov in the foreground.

I tapped Dreadlocks on the shoulder. “Let me hear this!” He quickly unplugged his earbuds.

Turov was laughing, a maniacal cackle if I’d ever heard one. I could see they were outside. The senator was in a T-shirt and boxers.

“Is that a rope around his neck?” Dreadlocks shouted.

“Crap,” I said, noticing the same thing. The rope disappeared at the top of the screen. His arms were tied together above his head.

I moved closer and squinted, trying to catch more of the surrounding area. I could only see a rusted steel beam and the glare of the sun.

“Alex? Are you there?” Turov brought the camera up to her face, her crazy eyes filling the entire screen. She then turned the camera left and right.

“What the—” Dreadlocks said, as others muttered behind me.

“What is this on?” I asked him.

“VidNow, this new social media site where you can share live video with anyone who sees you’re online. I just stumbled onto her. Who is this woman?”

I squeezed the back of his chair, knowing Turov had somehow pulled off the ultimate crime, an event that would live in infamy, especially since so many eyes would watch this. A digital train wreck, but much, much worse.

I opened my jaw, but Turov started talking. “I hope you’re there, Alex. It just makes it much more fun, you know?”

Dreadlocks jumped in. “Who the hell is this Alex person?”

“Shh,” I said.

“I kind of feel a kinship to you, Alex. We’ve been through a lot over the last few months, you and I. All those men, Mark...and even Monty. Yep, I saw him ogling you at the bar that night, the same night he’d spoken to me. Shit happens, I guess. Maybe in different ways, though. You, you’re kind of a dog on a bone. Then again, that’s what make you special. Hunting me all over

the East Coast, it's been the ride of a lifetime." She laughed again, and I could feel my heart hammering my chest. I wanted to reach through the screen and claw her eyes out.

She suddenly drew a serious look.

"Alex, to make this more fun, I'll give you four hours to find us. No, check that. You're pretty good. Two hours. Yep, two hours to find the good senator from Idaho and me. If you find us, then he lives. Otherwise, well..."

A menacing blade moved up from the bottom part of the screen. "I'll hang him, and then I'll cut him up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Or maybe I'll cut him up and then hang him. Depends on what feels right."

She flicked her tongue back and forth and then slowly ran it up the side of the blade. "We all have our ways of being satisfied, don't we, Alex?"

The screen turned black.

"What happened?" I asked Dreadlocks as if he was an IT geek.

"Think she disconnected."

I flipped around as the guy said, "Hey, any chance you're this Alex person?"

Dad was standing up, a napkin in his hand. I grabbed my purse, pulled out a twenty, and threw it on the table.

"Alex, what's going on?" He rubbed his head as his eyes shifted over to the blank screen on the tablet and then back to me.

I punched in a quick text to Archie. *Get ur ass to 7th and independence.*

"It's that case you're working on, isn't it?"

"Classified. Gotta run. I'll call you later." I gave him a stiff hug and called Nick.

"Alex, hey," he said. "Gretchen just stuck her head in the war room saying something about a video and Turov. We might have a lead."

"I saw it all. Watched it on a guy's tablet. She's kidnapped Gusset." I gave him the details on what I'd seen.

"Holy shit." I then heard him barking out instructions.

I said, "Assemble the team on a call and bring me in. Include Capitol Police and the Secret Service. We've got two hours. No, make that one hour fifty-six minutes."

I punched the call dead as I made it outside, a gust of wind carrying a waft of sewage across my face. My phone buzzed. A text from Archie.

Im here.

I looked up just as the bumblebee scattered the crowd in front of the diner.

"Good timing," I said, running up to the driver's side open window. "Turov kidnapped the senator. She's given me two hours to find him. We have to find him."

He touched my arm. "Alex, they're calling me in." His placid expression spoke volumes.

"What are you talking about?"

“I think they’re going to make me the scapegoat for this trail of blood.”

“But you’ve turned out to be okay.” It sounded strange to say those words, but I was serious.

“It’s okay. I’ll land on my feet. But I can’t go with you. You should be getting a call from another agent shortly. You can team with him or her.”

I dropped my head and stared at the concrete then turned and spotted the Capitol as my mind replayed the image of Turov licking the knife.

“Get out of the car.”

“What?”

I pulled open the door, and he slowly got out, his face locked in confusion.

I brushed his shoulder as I jumped into the driver’s seat. “I can’t wait for all the bureaucratic bullshit.”

“But Alex, the CIA will have your ass for dinner unless you fall in line. Look what they did to me.”

With my hand on the door, I paused my gaze for a split second. “So be it. Good luck in your meeting. Give me a holler sometime. Later.”

Slamming the door shut, I slid the gear into drive and punched it.

I snapped the phone into the holder suctioned to the front window—a pretty cool little tool that Archie had purchased about three murders prior—and asked my digital butler to call Nick.

“What happened? I thought you were supposed to bring me into a conference call?”

“That was five minutes ago. Been on the horn with FBI brass and Jerry. He’s got a hostage rescue team on call waiting for an address. Hold on a second.”

A rustling noise, followed by sharp voices, male and female.

Then Nick said, “Brad’s bringing up the conference call right now from the Polycom. I’ll pull my phone into it so you can listen in.”

I motored through about six blocks and found myself in the southern part of DC. I crossed over the upper part of the Potomac River, taking Route 4 eastbound. I knew Turov wasn’t near a big city. She had to be in a remote location but still close enough to get there in two hours. She wanted me to get there; at least I thought she did.

“All hands are on deck.” Jerry had taken the reins on the call. “Time is ticking, ladies and gentleman. We’ve got under two hours if we want to save a senator’s life.”

“First, I think we need to ensure we follow protocol, just to make sure we don’t have fingers pointed our way after the fact.” A man’s voice.

“Who’s this?” I jumped in.

“CIA Assistant Director Joseph Cain. Is this Special Agent Troutt?”

“We don’t have time for protocol. I need to hear from my team so we can hunt down this homicidal maniac before she kills Gusset.”

He cleared his throat. “As a starting point, we need the head of the joint

task force to declare this a formal act of terrorism on US soil.”

Was he hard of hearing? I could feel my pulse peppering my neck like a drum roll.

“You guys are still stuck on that hammer and sickle tattoo, thinking Turov is some kind of Russian spy? Or would that just make it easier to sell to the public once they find out that you’ve been covering up for a war crime, gang rape, and a CIA-trained murderer who’s been allowed to walk the streets while you knew she was a danger to everyone who crossed her path.”

“You better stand down, Troutt, or I’ll—”

“Hey,” Jerry barked. “Stop the bickering. I don’t care about your agency affiliation or your title. If you don’t have anything to offer to help us find where Turov is holding Gusset, then get off this call. Understood? Now, down to business.”

I pumped my fist, then noticed I was crossing the Beltway, zipping under I-495 on the southeast side of DC.

“Alex, she called you out, and we know about the notes she’s left for you. But I don’t want you arriving on the scene all alone. We have an HRT ready to move from Quantico.”

“Nick passed that along. I need some help. Gretchen, Brad?”

“Right here, Alex,” Brad said.

“Have you been in contact with the people at this VidNow company?”

“Gretchen has their CEO on the other line.”

“Cool. I won’t get into why they don’t keep parasites like Turov off the Internet, but can they tell us where her IP originates? I need an idea on which direction I should be moving.”

Gretchen spoke up. “Turov is doing something with her phone. Her IP is bouncing all over the country, even into Canada. Hundreds of possible locations.”

“Shit!” I heard Jerry’s fist pound the table. “Can’t they just shut the damn thing off?”

“It’s called shutting down the server,” Gretchen said in her soprano pitch.

“Don’t do that!” I called out. “We’ve got to get a better idea of where she is.”

“Right,” Jerry said.

Fingernails tapped across a keyboard in rapid fire, then Gretchen spoke up. “Alex, I just sent you a text. Click the link, and it will load the VidNow app on your phone. I’ve set it up where once Turov goes back on the air—I guess, if she does—then you’ll see the video.”

Silence for a few seconds as I punched my screen and watched the download bar fill up. While I waited, the light traffic came to a standstill. Up ahead I noticed flashing red and white lights. I pulled off to the apron and cruised up the side, moving far too fast to be safe. A Maryland state trooper held up his hand.

I held my badge through the open window. “What’s the holdup?”

“Gas truck crashed and spilled all five thousand gallons across the road and into the median. Traffic is shut down, both directions. We’re looking at a ten-to twelve-hour shutdown.”

I noticed a crossroad up ahead, and I pointed in that direction. “Where’s that go?”

“That’s Route 301. Takes you south through a rural part of the state. Lots of marshes down that way.”

I waved an arm and jammed my foot to the floorboard, accidentally spraying dust and gravel in his face. “Sorry,” I yelled out the window.

“I’m tracking you, Alex,” Brad said.

I quickly glanced at the phone a couple of times then returned my focus to the road. “The VidNow app finished loading. Nothing but a blue screen underneath a heading that says User Name - TKM.”

“The Killing Machine.”

“Archie?”

“That’s me. I decided to join the call. Nothing to lose. Just waiting in the hallway for my come-to-Jesus meeting, as I’ve been told.”

“Agent Woods, this is Assistant Director—”

“I don’t give a shit. This woman is butchering people faster than we can count. And we, or I guess it’s more like you, the CIA, could have stopped it before it ever started. We saw the session notes from Dr. Teague, another one of Turov’s victims that she sliced open.”

A few beats of silence, everyone likely in shock over Archie’s surprising pushback. I was as well, but I didn’t have time to offer my congratulations for sticking it to the man.

“Now what?” I asked.

Brad jumped in. “We’re pulling the video from Turov’s first session and running it against a database of rural pictures. This new program is supposed to be able to identify a percentage of photos with similar elements.”

“How long will that take?”

“Who knows? Gretchen, your best guess?” Brad asked.

“A few hours. Hard to say. Could be two, or might be eight or ten. The software intelligence is rather new, might be a bit buggy.”

Without a car in sight, I increased my speed up to eighty-five, all while looking for a small bridge. For the next sixty minutes, I drove while the others tossed around theories. Every five minutes, Gretchen would offer an update on the geographical recognition program. On her last update, she’d said, “Looks like we’re only at sixty percent done.”

I began to question my decision to turn onto this road to nowhere. She could be a hundred miles the other direction. If so, Gusset was as good as dead.

Just as the thought left my mind, my phone lit up. The first image was of the blue sky with a few white clouds. Then Turov moved the phone to where she took up most of the screen.

“Hey there, Alex. Just checking in. Me and the senator are getting lonely. Want to make it a party of three?”

She walked over and used the side of her knife to pop the senator’s gut. He wiggled and grunted.

“There we go. Finally a little bit of feistiness. Want to give us a few of those hip thrusts that you gave those twins? You know, the girls who work for that PAC that’s been funneling all the money into your campaign.”

I heard a snort on the conference line. I think it might have been Nick covering his laughter, likely noting how one of the most notorious serial killers in the country was further exposing Gusset and the overlap between his political machine and his personal proclivity for screwing twins.

“Let’s see, we’re down to...” Just then, the picture turned upside down, then flipped around in all sorts of angles. “Crap,” I heard her say, then a few rapid thuds.

The phone must have slipped through her fingers.

Keeping one eye on the road and another glued to the tiny screen, I took mental pictures of every single angle. A cloud shot, a shot of a steel beam where the rope was tied to it, a shot of Turov’s black pants, another shot of the pavement with a faded yellow line running down the middle, then a shot of the area just behind Gusset. Tall grass sitting in water on the banks of a narrow river.

I noticed a sign for the Zekiah Swamp. The exit was two miles away.

Turov righted the camera, her face rooted with frustration. She stuck out her jaw. The playful Turov had faded away. “Six minutes, bitch. Show up and he lives. You miss it by ten seconds and he dies. Of course, you’ll be doing your country a favor if you run a little bit late. I won’t tell. Ha!”

The screen went blue.

“Jerry, call in the HRT. I’m exiting as we speak.” The muscle car fishtailed as I hung a left. “Moving east onto Highway 234.”

“We got you,” Brad said.

“Alex, be careful,” Nick said. “Wait on the HRT. Remember, she’s a killing machine.”

A half mile down the road, I saw a sign for Budds Creek Road. I veered right and plowed through a rickety wooden fence across the old road. Not thirty seconds later, I could see a splinter of the Potomac. “I’ve been here before,” I said. I fished my Glock out of my purse and rested it on my lap.

“What?” Nick asked. “You’re there? You’ve been there before?”

The desolate bridge was straight ahead, but I knew she’d already seen the bumblebee, heard the grumbling engine.

“Gusset’s got under a minute to live,” Nick said.

“But HRT is still ten minutes out,” Jerry said.

Rocks rattled against the frame of the sports car as I sped closer, my eyes searching for the senator. Less than a quarter of a mile away, I saw something dangling on the left side, but it wasn’t a man. It was just a rope. I skidded to a

stop at the edge of the bridge and threw the door open.

“Alex, HRT is...”

I left the phone in the car, and with my head on a swivel and both hands clutching my gun, I made a beeline toward the rope. No sign of Turov as I reached the point where the rope dropped. I looked up and saw it tied to a beam ten feet above me, extending at least ten feet out above the marshy waters. Looking down, I could see Gusset’s arms and head. He was perched on some type of makeshift wooden platform, about a foot in diameter. I wanted to call out, but I knew I couldn’t.

Racing around to the end of the bridge, I scooted halfway down the banks. I spotted another beam that crossed right next to the senator. I slid the gun in the back of my pants and plowed up the hill to reach the beam. I knew a minute had passed, but no sign of Turov. Maybe she’d teased me all along and was now on a boat headed out into the Atlantic.

I could see the senator moving. I looked down as I took my first step on the beam, no more than four inches wide. Holding out my arms for balance, I noticed I was about twenty-five feet off the ground. I moved heel to toe, puffing out breaths as if I were giving birth. Just needed to keep the cadence and my focus.

I was ten feet from Gusset. His right eye blinked repeatedly.

“Almost there,” I said.

Three feet away, I reached for the rope, then felt the weight of a boulder drop on my body. It was Turov, who must have been hiding under the bridge. I lost my footing, and my shoulder crunched against the beam. She slid off my back and landed on her knees as she screamed out loud. She swung her knife, but I’d already started falling. I swung my arm back, stuck a finger inside her pant leg, and held on for life. She toddled for a moment, then just before falling backward, she kicked out a boot and shoved the senator off the platform.

As I dropped to the earth, I watched helplessly as Gusset plunged six feet. I heard his neck snap like a twig just before I splashed into the water. The impact knocked the air out of me. Not a half-second later, just as my mouth reached the surface, Turov fell on top of me, her boots smashing my face, her knees slamming into my ribs. I swallowed a mouthful of water, and I began to choke as I sank. She began to flail her arms, and even under water I could make out her muted voice, an odd combination of laughing and crying.

I could feel panic start to take over as my lungs filled with water. I couldn’t breathe. I kicked and clawed but couldn’t find the surface. And then the edges of my vision became dark, and I started to lose the urge to fight. For a quick second, an image of my father on the sailboat, me holding a tennis ball and tossing it in the air. Then another image, me with Erin and Luke, throwing snowballs at each other in the front yard as a half-built snowman sat there waiting for its head.

I opened my eyes, and through the murky water I saw the blade of the

knife swish right by my face. When it missed, for the first time I saw fear in her eyes, as her arms and legs appeared out of sync, unable to tread water. I quickly realized Turov wasn't a good swimmer. A final jolt of energy electrified my body. I pushed myself under her body, grabbing her boot as I moved behind her, pulling her head under water. Then I went after the knife. Using my leg as a fulcrum, I dropped her arm across my thigh and slammed both of my fists onto her forearm. She screamed out. I'd broken her arm, and I watched the knife fall out of her hand and disappear in the light current of water. I pushed off of the top of her head, propelling myself to the surface. I came up coughing, barely able to take in oxygen. But even a little helped my brain. I got in three deep breaths, then I felt a tug on my leg.

I dropped back under as Turov dug her teeth into my calf. She quickly reached bone. I wasn't going to screw with this bitch any longer. I stuck two fingers up her nostrils and two in an eye and yanked with everything I had. I felt skin rip in my hands, and she unclenched her teeth. Then I rammed my elbow into her temple, and she went limp.

I pushed back to the surface and gasped for more air. I heard the *whomp* *whomp* of helicopter blades as water rippled around me. Turov's body bumped mine. I grabbed a fistful of her shirt and realized she was unconscious. I thought about all the death by her hands, and for a moment, I considered just leaving her there. Still snorting up water, I looked at the muddy shore, then I gripped her good arm and pulled her with me.

Soldiers called out my name, and I saw boots all around me. Pushing up to my hands and knees, I saw the senator swaying in the gentle breeze. Turov had killed her final victim. And it wasn't me.

Leaning over my sink, I applied mascara, then a small layer of eyeshadow. Finally, I searched through my cadre of lipsticks, found a ruby red, and puckered.

“Going all out tonight, huh, Dr. Alex?”

I glanced in the mirror and saw Ezzy leaning against the doorway.

“I don’t know. Just thought I’d put a little effort into it. I really don’t know how it’s supposed to work. I haven’t been...”

“I know, dear. I’m just glad you’re getting out, socializing. Putting that crazy work stuff out of your head.”

I looked in the mirror and took in a breath. While I’d used a fair amount of cover-up, I could still make out a shade of purple on my jawline. The pain was still front and center as well. But I wasn’t about to harp on something that insignificant.

“Something is still troubling you, Alex, even three weeks later, huh?”

I chose not to look at my prying nanny and good friend.

“I’m good.”

“That’s code for something’s not good.”

The lipstick slipped through my fingers and fell into a cup of water.

“Dammit, now that’s ruined too.”

Ezzy reached in and fished out the lipstick.

“Alex, tell me what’s going on.”

I could feel tears bubble in my eyes. I huffed out a breath. “Dad called me today. Said he’d spoken with the CIA and another FBI agent.”

“Good Lord, girl, what did he do now?”

I locked eyes with her in the mirror as my hands dropped to the counter. I felt blood draining from my head, and I started to sway.

“He...” I filled my lungs again. “He set me up, Ezzy.” A single tear escaped, but Ezzy was there with a tissue before it dropped from my face.

She hugged me, and I hugged her back as more tears flowed. A minute later, both of us sat on the edge of the bed I used to share with Mark.

“Go on, let it all out.”

I swallowed back some emotion. “Turov contacted Dad the night before. Knew that he was in financial trouble and offered him ten thousand dollars if he’d meet me for breakfast. She also instructed him to casually bring up our fishing trip.”

Her brow furrowed as she set her hand on my knee. “Why in the world...?”

“Pure and simple. Greed.”

“Dear God, Alex, this...I can’t imagine how you feel, girl. I’m just sorry.”

I dotted my face, realizing my makeup was smeared to hell. “He claims he had no idea that she was the killer I’d been chasing, the one who was behind Mark’s murder. Supposedly, she told him we were old friends from our training days at Quantico. He thought she was going to play a joke on me, get me to chase down a make-believe mystery just out of fun.”

“Of all the stories...Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know what to believe, Ezzy. I only saw him because I craved knowing more about my childhood, my family life, with Mom and Dad. He was a wreck, and what he told me about Mom just made our lives seem so dysfunctional, bordering on disturbing.”

I heard a stampede up the stairs, and I turned to the doorway and watched Pumpkin rumble into the room followed closely by a buzzing drone. A few feet behind, Luke was shuffling along in his Darth Vader slippers, giggling as his hair bounced up and down.

“Yo, Mom, did you see my drone cut on a dime at the door. It’s as quick as Pumpkin.”

The orange furball leaped onto the bed and buried himself in the mound of pillows.

I cracked up and said, “Pumpkin thinks he’s under attack. Why don’t you put that thing up and give him a treat. Just so he knows you still care about him.”

“I’m just messing around. Ah, okay.”

Ezzy gave me another reassuring hug, and I reapplied my makeup and went downstairs where Erin was vegging on the couch, her hand buried in a bowl of popcorn as a movie flickered on the flat screen.

“Enjoying yourself?”

“It’s scary, so yes.”

“What’s up with the black-and-white movie?”

She tossed a kernel of popcorn, and it landed in her mouth. “Just some director thinking he’s all that, trying to be different.”

I walked into the kitchen and picked up my purse. The doorbell rang.

Ezzy looked into my eyes, and I knew what she saw. Reluctance.

“Can you go tell him I’m sick, and I need a rain check?”

“Not if you paid me a million dollars. Now march to that door, Alex.”

She extended her hand and shot me a wink.

Luke zipped by with a treat in his hand, and then I glanced over at Erin.

“But I’d rather stay here, with you guys. Just us. I need my family, Ezzy.” I sounded like a whiner.

She took both of my shoulders and squeezed them. “You’ve been at home for three weeks straight. Your family will always love you and will always be here. It’s time to live a little, Alex.”

Taking in a breath, I nodded like a nervous girl just before performing her first dance recital...or competing in her first tennis match. My heels slowly clipped the hardwoods as I made my way through the living room.

Erin looked at me and held her gaze. Without taking her eyes off me, she walked over and held my hand.

“Mom,” she said, glancing away for a second. “I know you’re apprehensive about taking this step. I know what Dad did.”

“Dear, why, how—”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve cried about it, talked to my friends. I’m good. I just want you to know—” She stopped, smiled at me, and squeezed my hand.

I felt the strangest sensation. When I looked in Erin’s beautiful eyes, I saw the innocence of her as a toddler, then a flash-forward of her as a determined, confident young lady.

A tear came to her eye. “Mom, you deserve to be happy. Please know that you’ll never lose this family. We’ll always be here for you, just like you’ve always been here for us, even on days when it’s tough, you know. I...I love you.”

“I love you too, Erin. And your brother too. And Ezzy. All of you.” We embraced, and then I turned to walk to the door.

“Text us when you’re on your way home,” Erin said as she plopped back on the couch.

I looked over at her, my grinning mouth open.

“Just kidding, Mom.”

I knew she wasn’t, but I let it ride.

With the guilt factor tucked firmly away, I marched to the front door. Tonight, I was going to let the real Alex Troutt out of her cage and have some adult fun. Finally.

ALSO BY JOHN W. MEFFORD

Redemption Thriller Series

The Alex Troutt Thrillers

AT Bay (Book 1)

AT Large (Book 2)

AT Once (Book 3)

AT Dawn (Book 4)

AT Dusk (Book 5)

AT Last (Book 6)

The Ivy Nash Thrillers

IN Defiance (Book 7)

IN Pursuit (Book 8)

IN Doubt (Book 9)

Break IN (Book 10)

IN Control (Book 11)

IN The End (Book 12)

The Ozzie Novak Thrillers

ON Edge (Book 13)

Game ON (Book 14)

ON The Rocks (Book 15)

Shame ON You (Book 16)

ON Fire (Book 17)

ON The Run (Book 18)

Note from the author:

Thank you for reading this latest Alex Troutt thriller.

Did you enjoy *AT Large*?

It would be great if you could leave a quick review on Amazon. I would appreciate it.

Here's the easy link: <http://smarturl.it/ATLarge>

Next In The Redemption Thriller Series – AT Once

“If you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.”

Boston Strong of just a few years ago is now Boston on Edge.

And this time, the targets are men of the cloth—priests.

Could Alex's friend and colleague be behind these bombings? Alex is torn between her loyalty of friendship and her FBI oath.

But what price will she ultimately pay?

Bloody Sunday. The IRA. The movement toward peace.

Wounds of decades ago have reopened, bleeding all over Boston.

As Alex pieces together the puzzle, she wonders just how innocent her colleague really is.

Just how far will someone go to make a stand?

AT Once is the third Alex Troutt Thriller (Redemption Thriller Series #3). An excerpt is just below.

Excerpt from AT Once (Book 3)

1

The Reverend Father shifted his body in the antique wooden chair, wincing as the wood creaked under his weight. How many confessions had that chair interrupted in its lifetime? Thousands?

He cleared his throat and curled his arthritic fingers around the edge of the wood to stop the annoying sound.

Silence.

He hesitated for an extra few seconds, as his thirty-plus years of experience told him the young lad on the opposite side of the booth needed the extra time to find the courage to admit his sins.

Seconds ticked, and all that could be heard was the sputtering grumble of an obnoxious motorcycle passing by the eighty-five-year-old church. While the Father typically didn't try to peek into the booth, his eyes couldn't resist the temptation. Through the intricately woven lattice that separated the two sides, he first noticed the faded denim. The man was leaning forward, elbows on his knees. A dark hood covered his head. He must be wearing a hoodie under his jacket. Not surprising, given the recent cold spell.

The Father took in a breath and instantly lurched forward, nearly releasing a wretched cough. Water filled his eyes, and he stuck a finger inside his clerical collar as he tried desperately to avoid a prolonged coughing session, which he knew would sound like a grizzly bear hacking up two lungs. Slowly, air seeped through his throat, a crackle escaping at the same time. He knew he needed to see the doctor about the nagging chest cold that had lingered throughout the winter and now into spring. Actually, he assumed he had walking pneumonia, but he'd never slowed down throughout his entire life—not when he used to run around his mama's kitchen with a red cape pretending to be Superman, and certainly not since he accepted the role of priest at St. Paul's Catholic Church almost thirty-four years earlier. Too many people relied on the Father to be the pillar of strength. While a few of his colleagues had suggested that he cut back on his activities, he had no desire to diminish his role, not with so many events to oversee and so many souls left to heal.

A quick intake of breath, and a cough escaped his lungs. The echo off the slate floors and arching walls was palpable. He winced again, not fond of yet another break in the serene setting.

This resurgence of his irritating cough had to be related to the darn Boston weather. Another dip in the temperatures, and here it was May. Some

years, he questioned if spring would ever arrive. For a split second, he wondered what retirement might feel like amidst palm trees and warm sand in Clearwater, Florida. He had a friend who'd made the life transition just this last year. His friend, however, had already called the Father, saying he missed the early-season visits to Fenway Park to watch the Red Sox play, even if the blustery wind numbed their faces.

Out of habit, the Father pulled up his black sleeve and noted the time on his digital watch: 11:52 a.m. He knew he couldn't rush confession, but in mere minutes, the church would be overrun with a group of young ladies dedicated to studying the Good Book. He took in a shortened breath and managed to finish the process unabated.

"Dear son, you have no reason to hold back. I will not judge you. I am here as an agent of God, to listen."

The Father could see the man shift and the sound of rustling jeans. Strangely, he thought he picked up a passing scent of charcoal. It didn't make sense, but time wasn't his friend at the moment, so the thought drifted away.

"If you do not wish to speak, then know that I absolve you from your sins. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"I, uh...bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

The Father nodded, a warm smile splitting his face. "Bless you, my son."

He crossed himself, and then he could see the man's hand extend forward. He was reaching for the door's latch, and the Father spoke up.

"Before you go, I must recite this verse that you should carry with you from now until you join Him in heaven. 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'"

The Father's concentration was broken as the man's hand jostled with the latch.

"Let me help you with that, son."

"No!" the man said with urgency. "I...I want to remain anonymous, if it's okay."

"That is fine. I hope you've found peace in your heart."

The door unlatched, and the man rushed out, banging the door against the side of the booth. "What do they call them? Millennials, that's it. They're always in a rush," the Father murmured, pushing off his legs.

And then the room exploded.

A gust of wind smacked my face, a few loose blond locks blowing wildly, as I turned toward the sea of flashing lights. No sign of Nick.

Corralling the wayward strands and curling them around my ear, I said to no one in particular, “Crap, it’s cold again.”

I turned up the collar of my new Michael Kors double-breasted, khaki trench coat, then blew into my cupped hands. Mother Nature had teased me once again. After a weekend of thawing under crystal-blue skies and a warming sun, winter had returned with a vengeance. Well, at least my version of winter, which was anything under fifty degrees. Adding in the potent Boston wind howling off the harbor and a gunmetal gray sky that felt like it might collapse on the city, and it was difficult not to believe some type of Siberian weather pattern had set its ass right on top of Beantown.

Lucky us.

Tapping the street with my stylish leather boot—I picked up the pair for sixty-percent off when I purchased the spring jacket over the weekend—my thin veneer of patience was being pushed to the limit by the frosty conditions.

Nick and I had worked together a good part of five months, ever since I returned to the FBI after wrapping my car around a tree. Well, someone did it for me, and I just went along for the ride. He and I had been partners before the crash as well, but further back in our careers. Apparently, I’d made a big stink about wanting to go solo. While it wasn’t hard to imagine my desire to do things at my own pace and on my own terms, I couldn’t recall the exact set of circumstances that had led to my decision. The memory police still hadn’t released a chunk of my brain from recollection hell. At this point, though, I didn’t fret much when I couldn’t recall something from my past life. I felt like I’d lived about three lives since then anyway.

I checked my phone and guessed that Nick was stuck in traffic. Hadn’t I seen signs that they shut down the Ted Williams Tunnel for some type of maintenance work?

“Screw it,” I said, flipping on a heel just in time to dodge two firemen before marching up the front stairs of St. Paul’s Catholic Church.

When I reached the fifteenth step, I quickly shifted to the right to allow the flurry of first responders to exit through the enormous front door. I grabbed one by the sleeve. “Is it safe to go in?”

“Structurally, I think you’re fine. Nothing can take down this church. It reminds me of Mount Ben Nevis.” The fireman removed his hard hat and ran his fingers through his orange mane. His sideburns nearly touched his lips.

I cocked my head to the side and did a quick keyword memory search, but came up blank. My expression showed as much.

The fireman added helpfully, “Ah, my family and I traveled back to the

hometown last summer. Lochaber, Scotland. Actually hiked up Mount Ben Nevis, right in the middle of the Scottish Highlands. It felt like the center of the Earth. Awesome views.”

“Thanks for the geography lesson.” I gave him a single pat on his shoulder and crossed the threshold. Almost instantaneously, my shoulders dropped a couple of inches as the building protected me from the weather. “Damn wind,” I said to myself, then realized where I stood—inside the largest Catholic church in Boston.

Just a few blocks away from Old North Church, where one Paul Revere started his infamous ride, warning his brethren about the British invasion—the soldiers, not the Beatles—St. Paul’s had always seemed to be that rock that never changed. It must have been over a hundred years old, and its baroque architecture and weathered stone facade added to its enchanting yet imposing aura.

I untied the belt to my coat and looked up to see two police officers signaling me to stop.

“ID,” one muttered. I could hardly see his lips moving under his thick mustache.

I hesitated for only a second, then shrugged. I wasn’t going to push back. Not in this setting.

I pulled my creds from my coat pocket and opened the leather casing at eye level. “Satisfied?”

“A fed. Shoulda figured.” He flipped his head toward his left shoulder, and I followed behind another uniformed officer. “By the way, they already pulled the body.”

My boot clipped to an instant stop. “Who the hell is in charge of this crime scene?” I could feel my brow furrow to the point it quivered.

“I’m ultimately responsible for this church. Can I help you?”

My eyes shifted another ninety degrees, and I first caught the chiseled chin and warm eyes of a man walking my way. A flash of white beneath his chin, and I noticed his clerical collar. I almost choked on my own saliva.

“Father Bryan Carroll,” he said, extending his hand. “Thank you for your assistance in this tragic moment, Miss...”

“Special Agent Troutt with the FBI. Alex Troutt,” I said. We shook hands, and then he cupped mine with his opposite hand, his gaze never leaving my eyes. There was a moment of awkward silence as I momentarily lost my train of thought in his syrupy eyes.

“Excuse me,” I said, using the opportunity to shift a half step back. “I, uh...” A cough escaped my lungs. “Just need a quick second.” I turned away and forced out two more hacking coughs to rid my lungs of any liquid.

“Now,” I said, resetting my stance to offer up a more professional appearance. “What is your role with St. Paul’s?”

“I’m the bishop for the Boston archdiocese.” His eyes found the floor for a quick moment, as a single horizontal line came to life just below his well-

coifed hair. He took in a fortifying dose of air, then licked his lips. “It has been one of those weeks that would test even the most faithful.”

Just a week earlier, I’d been at the scene of another bombing, at the residence of a priest from a Catholic church in Malden. “I’m very sorry about the loss of life. And I’m sure we’ll have more to discuss later. Right now, I need to speak to the detective in charge and begin my investigation.”

He nodded and gave me a tight-lipped smile. “I only wish to help as best I can. We can’t let the public think that coming to church, going to confession will lead to death.”

“I understand. Is the crime scene in this direction?”

“Yes, just down the hallway, then take a left. Fortunately, all the damage was contained to that one room we think. It’s just that...” He looked away again and then clasped his hands at his waist. “Let’s just say that Father Fahey is in a much better place than the rest of us. God rest his soul.” And then he crossed himself.

Despite his warm demeanor, which bordered on charming, his serious approach to religion literally made my air passages close up. It went back to when I was a young girl and my mom lost herself in her so-called religious beliefs, ignoring my dad and me. She’d sit on the hearth, holding a rosary, rocking back and forth while muttering indecipherable phrases as she stared at a cross on the wall. She died in a car crash when I was eight years old, so my lasting memory of her was quite limited.

I never outwardly blamed anyone in the religious world for my mother’s fanaticism, but for some reason—even after going through my fair share of heartache in the last several months—I knew a seed of resentment was always lurking deep down inside me.

“Thank you, Father—”

“Alex!”

Before I could turn my head, Nick slammed into my shoulder, which sent me into the arms of the priest. Actually more like into his cupped hands. It was as if we’d planned the slapstick move for weeks. He palmed my breasts like he was honking two horns. He quickly removed his hands and held his arms straight up, and with Nick’s unsupported weight dropping onto the back of my legs, I slid down the front of Father Bryan. With my arms flailing to somehow keep from face-planting, my hands grabbed the priest’s pants, which thankfully stayed up.

“What the hell, Nick?” I asked, stumbling quickly to my feet, my eyes averting the Father’s.

“Sorry. I’m wearing new dress shoes, and it just started raining outside, and...I don’t know.”

I offered the priest a pained grin and shrugged, then nodded and scurried away, passing the two cops who couldn’t hide their shit-eating grins, Nick right on my heels.

“I said I was sorry.”

“That’s okay. Just awkward there for a moment,” I said, pulling blue plastic gloves out of my coat pocket as we walked down a hallway lined with classrooms and framed pictures of crosses.

Nick’s short, choppy steps stole my attention, and I turned to him, my eyes locking with his. “What? I don’t want to create another full-blown incident.”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t call it a *full-blown* incident.”

“True. I just accidentally ran into you as you were swooning over the man of cloth.”

“I wasn’t swooning,” I said in monotone, now looking straight ahead. I could feel Nick’s smirk. “I wasn’t swooning,” I repeated.

“You were swooning.”

“Focus, Nick.”

Just as we reached an intersecting hallway, a medic and a plainclothes cop zipped around the corner, nearly running us over.

“Out of the way,” someone said from behind them.

Each of the hurried men had rigid expressions as they rushed down the hall.

“They sure looked upset,” Nick asked.

I nodded. “Yep.”

A man walked up, shaking his head, his hands at his waist just inside his tweed sport coat. I assumed he was a detective. “Poor souls. We get past the anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings just a few weeks ago...now this shit. Those two guys both lost their wives on that day. They just couldn’t deal with this scene back there.”

Even after all this time, their wounds were still fresh. My heart thumped a little quicker, and I took in a breath, my chest growing tighter. I could relate on a personal level, given how my husband had been slaughtered. While I knew my personality wasn’t suited for group therapy sessions, part of me wanted to catch up to the two men, and if not comfort them, at least commiserate. But now wasn’t the right time, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to open up myself for another shot of emotional drama.

“It’s a real shame that they had to see this,” Nick said.

“This isn’t going to be easy on anyone in this city,” I offered.

I noticed the cop was still shaking his head, looking beyond my shoulder, his mind most likely thinking back to the day that launched Boston into turmoil, first with the pair of marathon bombings and then with the ensuing manhunt. While some of my memories were spotty, that period of my life was far too easy to recall. The pressure to figure out who was behind the gutless killings had every law enforcement and government official on edge.

The difficulty factor was increased significantly because of the public’s knowledge of the crime, festered by the tidal wave of media that invaded the city and every surrounding town. I couldn’t walk down the street without a reporter or producer picking me out of a crowd and hounding me with

questions. I knew it was their job, but catering to a giant mass of journalists, and some who pretended to be in that profession, was akin to holding a royal wedding, minus all the pomp and circumstance.

The officer's eyes were moist.

"Did you know anyone who...you know?" Nick asked.

The man didn't respond, and I motioned for Nick to keep moving.

We turned the corner, and I could see the end of a long hallway where men and women with ATF shirts walked out of a room.

"By the way, what took you so long to meet me here?"

"Traffic. Can you believe they closed the Ted Williams Tunnel in the middle of a business day? Traffic hasn't been this bad since the Big Dig."

The biggest road construction project ever attempted in the United States—the Big Dig, as it became known—drew skeptics and complainers like flies to shit. "I think they spent more money on the Big Dig than all of the combined trips to space," I said, pulling on my rubber gloves.

"Hell, the damn thing took fifteen, sixteen years. The next time they suggest another road project, I think the citizens of Boston should just say, 'No, we'd rather go ahead and set up a colony on Mars.'" Nick brought a hand to his mouth to cover his laughter as I stuck my elbow in his side.

Pulling up to the room, I glanced around for someone who appeared to be in charge. Lots of worker bees, but no queen...other than the one next to me. I giggled internally. While Nick was indeed gay, it wasn't really public knowledge inside the Bureau, although I was almost certain our closest colleagues were aware.

A lady with a hard face wearing an extra-tight pantsuit approached, a young male officer speaking within inches of her ear. Nick and I both held up our badges.

"I've been expecting you," she said. "Captain Doris Lockett."

Nick and I did the quick intro, then I asked, "I know it's early, but has your team made any connection to the bomb that killed the priest last week?"

"You're right. It's too early, but we did get an initial COD from the ME's office," she said, while taking a quick glance at a tablet the male officer had put in front of her face.

"Do tell," I said.

"Nothing you wouldn't expect from someone who died from an explosion. The priest's neck was snapped, but it was likely the percussive shock of the blast that ruptured his lungs and heart, killing him almost instantly." Nick openly winced as she hesitated, her vision drifting for a second.

While not exactly a candidate to appear on AARP brochures, Captain Lockett didn't wear a permanent scowl like so many others who had her position and seniority. Her white-silver hair would have glowed in the dark. Loose skin sagged in all the expected places, and for a second I wondered if that would be me in fifteen years—if I remained in the same profession.

She began to fidget with her earring. I hadn't noticed the platinum hoops earlier, probably because they blended in with her silver vibe. *Wait...are those diamonds encrusted around the hoop? Surely they're fake.*

She broke my concentration by saying, "It was a disturbing sight, let me tell you. Of course, you'll have full access to any pictures or other evidence."

I tried to maintain an even keel, knowing she was attempting professional courtesy. "I'm assuming since you knew the FBI was on the way that you had a strong reason to cart off the body?"

She shrugged. "First, no one wants to do their job while a bloodied cadaver is staring them in the face. And second—"

"I couldn't complete my analysis of the bomb scene until the body was moved."

I turned and looked straight up. It was Lurch...or his better-looking twin. "Special Agent Troutt," he said with a nod.

The ATF agent, with whom I'd crossed paths a couple of months earlier when a lunatic former state police officer had murdered her boss in his own home, looked nothing like the man from back then. Had he simply shaved and gotten a haircut? The man appeared to have graduated from one of those makeover programs. Maybe there was an advanced degree at Whitetrash University.

"Uh..." I couldn't recall his name. Even worse, I wasn't sure I ever knew his name.

"Allen. Allen Small."

"Of course. Agent Small," I said, while swatting a hand as if it was on the tip of my tongue. "You were saying something about giving Captain Lockett the go-ahead to move the body."

"That's exactly what I said." Despite his intimidating height, his posture was anything but. Same with his tone of voice. Yet he'd still overstepped his bounds.

I could feel my core warming from the inside out. "It's too late now, but in the future, that would be the FBI's call. Anyone who's ever worked with me understands—"

"It's not that simple, Alex. I know you may not understand the complexity of how we go about working a bomb scene—"

"Hold on, you two."

We turned our heads toward the captain. "I've seen my fair share of turf battles over the years. I'm sure I've even caused a few myself. But one thing that the Boston Marathon bombings finally taught me is that we *can* get along, and we *should* get along if we expect to work effectively together."

"Absolutely," I declared, shifting my eyes back to Allen.

"Damn straight." He didn't blink for ten seconds.

No other words were spoken, and I took the lead and stepped into the room, Nick and Small close behind. Splinters of wood were scattered everywhere. On the opposite wall, I spotted blood splatter just under a cracked

framed picture of what looked like Jesus. The picture was dangling at an angle. A more concentrated area of crimson was pooled next to the remnants of a chair.

“Can you verify if the priest was the only casualty?”

“As far as we know, he was the only one,” Small said, edging up to next to me. Nick knelt within listening distance, inspecting shards of wood that looked more like thin daggers that could slice a piece of skin like warm butter.

“As far as you know,” I repeated with a slightly annoyed tone.

“The secretary said Father Fahey had confessional time set aside from ten a.m. to noon. The bomb went off just a few minutes before noon. When the secretary entered the room, she only saw the Father. No one else.”

I nodded, and then Nick chimed in. “There could have been someone in the other side of the confessional box.”

“If there was, that person would likely be dead. Although that person could also have been running out of the room at the time the bomb went off. Might have been injured.”

I scanned the area around our feet and noticed Small’s ski-sized shoes, a buckled leather number.

“But no sign of blood on the path out the door?”

“Your Evidence Response Team can take a look, but no one from Boston PD has found any other blood besides what you see here.”

I surveyed the distance between the blood and the door. I estimated it was about thirty feet away.

“So, you’re thinking there was a timing device?” I asked.

He nodded and pulled out an evidence bag with a tiny piece of metal. “Need to run it through forensics, but I think this tiny piece of metal is part of a standard digital watch.”

“So it would have beeped just before it went off,” Nick said, while trying to lift to a standing position. He stopped about halfway up and clenched his knee.

“You okay, gramps?” I asked.

“Ah,” he replied.

Small gave a passing glance at my partner as he continued with the breakdown of the bomb blast. “It would have basically been instantaneous.”

“When you noted the cause of death, I didn’t hear anything about shrapnel. And I don’t see anything visible like nails or screws lying around.”

“You’re wondering if there’s any connection to the bombing at Father Timothy Brennan’s house last week. Other than the fact that both bombs were made in crude fashion, they are different types of bombs. Last week we had the pipe bomb, and as you know, when Brennan opened his mailbox, he was pummeled by shrapnel. His face, neck, and shoulders looked like they’d been put through a paper shredder.”

A uniformed cop who happened to be passing by us stopped midstride and stared at Small. Suddenly, his torso lurched uncontrollably. “I’m gonna be

sick,” he grunted. His cheeks filled up as he gagged, and he hoofed it toward the door.

Small shrugged. “I guess he hadn’t heard the details about Brennan’s death.” I tucked my lips between my teeth and shook my head—it was a bad situation all the way around. Small added, “He’s just lucky he didn’t see the corpse, or any of the pictures. He’d have nightmares for two months straight.”

I paused for a quick moment, realizing how elusive sleep had been for me the last few months. I could feel the distant throb of pain simmering in my frontal lobe, but I pinched the corners of my eyes and tried to fool myself into thinking I just needed another shot of caffeine. I craved a coffee.

“Even if you’ve seen just about everything, it can still leave a mark on you,” I said softly while peering straight up at Small.

He took in a breath and swallowed once, as if recalling a flood of images he would just as soon forget. “Collateral damage. That’s what I call it for those of us who endure this crap every day. That’s why we need some time away every once in a while to decompress, to remind us that not every person who walks this earth is a depraved, sick bastard.”

A wet, gurgling sound behind me.

I looked over my shoulder, and two feet behind us was a nun clearing her throat, the scowl on her face so tormented it appeared she was trying to down brass tacks.

“Sir, can you please refrain from using such language in a house of worship?” She shook a finger just under the chin of the ATF agent. “Here we are dealing with the loss of Father Fahey, and we have to listen to that filth.”

“My apologies,” Small said with a slow dip of his head.

Her eyes, initially steely and cold, now glistened as tears pooled in the corners. She brought her hands together in front of her face in a prayerful position. “I...” Her voice quivered, and I glanced around, trying to find anyone else from the church who might be able to comfort her.

“He was the most compassionate person I’ve ever known. Special. I dedicated my whole life to God’s work, and because of that, I guess I felt like I should be given the privilege of being immune to tragedy. For those I care about, for those I...love.”

Her eyes wandered over to the bloody wall, as veins bulged from both temples.

Nick and I traded a quick glance. We had this thing sometimes, where we both had the same thought at the same time. This was one of those times.

“We’re very sorry for the loss of the church, and for you, Sister,” I said, touching her elbow.

Flinching slightly, she blinked twice and shifted her sights back to us. “Oh, I’m Sister Tamela. Yes, a tremendous loss for the parishioners of this old church. Paul...uh, Father Fahey had a heart of gold and more energy than five priests half his age. I’ve never seen a man so dedicated to helping people, even if it meant sacrificing his health.”

Nick stepped closer. "Did the Father have health issues?"

"I'm almost certain he had pneumonia. That old stubborn coot wouldn't even talk about it, let alone go see a doctor. Too many souls to heal, he always said."

I escorted the Sister out of the room, found another church official, and made the handoff. As I turned back around, Nick was standing there with his arms crossed, scratching a chin with less scruff than a sixteen-year-old kid.

He dipped his head closer. "She and the Father had something going on, don't you think?"

"She was upset, and who wouldn't be? But yes, it seemed like there was a little extra emotion in her voice."

"Not sure what that means for our investigation, but we have two dead priests, two different types of bombs, and no obvious leads, other than a grieving nun," Nick said, as he pulled out a piece of gum and squashed it in his mouth.

An officer accidentally bumped my shoulder in the narrow hallway.

"Too many ears in this place," I said in a low voice to Nick. "Assemble the team. We need some quick research."

Nick stopped smacking his lips for a second. "I've heard that before. That means we might be working for the next four straight days with no sleep."

"Not if my theory is right."

"Hallelujah!" Nick said.

“Do you think he’s telling the truth?” Nick whispered.

An invisible cloud of spearmint invaded my personal space, and I held my breath for a moment. Leaning my weight on the arm of his chair, Nick continued chomping his gum like it was the only remaining method to generate power to the FBI building.

We were sitting in the office of Jerry Molloy, our supervisory special agent, or in the land of federal acronyms, our SSA. Jerry—leaning back so far in his swivel chair I thought it might topple over— was on the phone. Given how I’d only heard an occasional “right” and “yes sir” in the last fifteen minutes, it told me he was likely speaking with someone in DC—above my pay grade, as I’d been told a hundred times.

“Alex?”

My eyes stayed on Jerry as I spoke to Nick in a soft tone. “Sorry, just running everything through my mind again. To answer your question, yes.”

Nick inched closer. “So you think that Father Carroll, the bishop of the Boston archdiocese, was being truthful when we asked him if he knew about any molestation allegations against either of the two dead priests.”

I leaned over to pick up my purse, and I nearly knocked heads with Nick. He got the hint and retreated to his own space. I pulled my phone out of my purse and checked for any messages from my two kids, Luke and Erin. Ezzy, our nanny who could have also been called our savior, was at a doctor’s appointment, which meant I had to be on call if necessary to be the cab driver for a sixth and ninth grader.

Truth be told, I was worried about Ezzy, whose naturally stubborn disposition was most visible whenever her health came into question. Hell, it seemed like we could have waterboarded her before she’d share any personal information. Ever since she fainted while bringing groceries in the house over a month ago, I’d been hounding her to see a doctor. Finally, she relented, if only to get me to shut up.

Whatever works.

“Yoo-hoo,” Nick said, waving his hand in front of my face.

“I heard you.” I placed my phone in my lap, crossed my arms, and moved my neck in a circular motion. I could still feel the tension in my shoulders from standing in the cold earlier. “We asked Father Carroll if he personally knew of any allegations, and he said no. That doesn’t mean that we can assume both of these priests were above reproach.”

“But he even said we could review their records without going through the hassle of obtaining a search warrant.”

“And I believe him.” I lifted my eyes to see Jerry nodding and grunting one-word responses. I had to assume he wasn’t being demoted or anything

that severe, not with him letting Nick and me sit in his office.

I glanced at Nick and said, "Still, though, we need to do our own research. While a number of people have come forward with allegations against their priests in the last several years, that doesn't mean the problem has been eradicated. There are bad apples in every profession."

"Including the FBI," Jerry said as he clicked the phone receiver into its base on his desk.

"You have something to share, Jer?" I gave him a cheeky smile.

He released a guffaw that jiggled his jowls like a ripple of water. "Oh, the stories I could tell." He sucked in a tired breath, while leaning forward to grab a doodad off his desk. The frame of his swivel chair whined in response to the extraordinary strain Jerry was putting on it. He leaned back again, his fingers toying with his little metal toy.

"We're all ears, and we won't tell a soul." Nick offered a grin.

"There's a better chance of me telling my mother-in-law than you two."

I tapped his desk, trying to act offended. "Seriously, you'd tell your in-law over your two best agents?"

Another jowl jiggle. "I give in, although I know you're just yanking my chain. Besides, my mother-in-law couldn't hear a chandelier drop from the ceiling if she was standing two feet from where it landed."

"But if she was two feet from where it landed, she'd probably suffer a major injury." Nick apparently enjoyed pointed out the obvious.

Jerry placed his big mitt of a hand on top of the papers scattered like leaves all over his desk. "Now you get my point." He winked, then went back to fiddling with his trinket.

"You asked us in here for a reason?" I held up my phone with the time clearly displayed to emphasize our desire to not waste any more time.

"Uh, yeah. Just want to hear your initial thoughts on this bombing. Any connection to last week?"

I reviewed the debrief we'd had earlier with the ATF agent formerly known as Lurch. "Small's not one to harp on theories and personas. He just simply gave us the facts."

"The facts. That's a good place to start. But can we conclude the same person is responsible for both bombs, and just as importantly, why?" Jerry said.

"It's only been a few hours," Nick said.

"So what's taking so long?"

Nick chuckled just once, but was met with a stone-cold stare. Our SSA wasn't in a joking mood.

"Look, I don't mean to be a jerk, but back when those two assholes set off bombs during the Boston Marathon, the people of this city endured unbearable pain and stress."

Nick let out an audible breath. "I remember it well. We were all working our asses off. Everyone I interacted with was on pins and needles."

“Shit, there was nothing needle-like about it. The DC brass was shoving a jackhammer up my ass during that time.”

I tried to steer away from the tense memories, as well as any pictures forming in my mind of Jerry’s crude analogy. I moved to the edge of my seat, signaling my desire to get the discussion back on track.

“Jer, I know you occasionally like to get into the weeds. So you don’t get surprised, we’re looking into the angle that this might be some type of revenge by a former altar boy.”

“Molestation?”

“That’s the thought.”

“No evidence points that way.”

“Nothing yet, but we’ve got Brad and Gretchen already scouring the Internet for threats or warnings related to that type of retribution, as well as anyone who was recently released from prison in the New England area and might have a fetish for bombs. You never know, those two searches could overlap. If so, we might have our perp.”

Jerry held up the metal trinket and squinted. “Sounds like you’ve got a good working theory. ATF going to play nice and share what they know without us having to go above their heads to Homeland Security again?”

“Yeah, I think we’re okay on that front.”

“You and Allen Small seemed to be more than okay,” Nick said. I swung my gaze his way. His eyes were twinkling.

I decided to ignore the middle school comment. I knew there was nothing between Small and me. How could there be? He was a foot taller.

“Keep this in mind as you work all your sources,” Jerry said, riding his chair forward until it banged to a stop as his belly pressed against the edge of his desk. “Think about the church in general, not just these two priests. Someone might be making a statement against the Pope, or church policy, or whatever.”

“I get it. Thanks for the insight,” I said, lifting to my feet. “By the way, you seem rather fond of your little toy there.”

“Ah, the Eiffel Tower. Not sure if you recall, but Tracy and I celebrated our twentieth anniversary in Paris six months ago. I’m not big on pictures, so this little guy, you know...”

“Yeah, I know.”

Lifting my eyes from the laptop screen, I could see a pair of smiles on the other side of the glass door to the war room.

I nudged Nick’s shoulder. “They’ve either broken the case in two hours flat, or Gretchen’s about to announce that she’s pregnant.”

Nick almost choked on his chewing gum. “Her being pregnant wouldn’t explain Brad’s toothy grin.”

“Good point.”

The glass door popped open and in walked Brad, one of the FBI's brightest young minds and our lead intelligence analyst. He was a half-stride in front of his diminutive sidekick, Gretchen, who, since transferring from the New York office, had established quite a reputation as a tireless researcher who didn't mind the junior role of staff operations specialist. In fact, my guess was she relished it, if only because it gave her the opportunity to work alongside Mr. Tall and Preppy. She'd put considerable effort into landing said target for a good couple of months. The pair had disappeared just after Nick and I left Jerry's office, and now, after witnessing their shit-eating grins, part of me wondered if they'd finally come out of hiding to share the latest news about their relationship.

"We think we have your perp." Brad plopped a file on the oval table.

Nick and I exchanged glances, then I looked at both Brad and Gretchen. I'd misjudged their grins, although Gretchen couldn't stop shifting her eyes to Brad's backside. Damn, she was smitten by the young man who had the looks of Ryan Gosling. At one point in time, Nick had joked with me about hooking up with Brad. While I recognized good looks just as much as the next girl, I wasn't ready for anything more than a flirtatious wink. On top of that, I viewed Brad as more of a younger brother. At least that's what I told myself whenever a wayward thought entered my mind.

Just then, my phone buzzed and rattled across the table as Nick snatched the folder and opened it.

I peeked at the screen and noticed it was Luke, my sixth grader. "Give me a minute," I said, standing up and walking away from the noise. I heard Nick from behind me. "I'm too curious. We're not waiting on you, Alex."

Flipping my head to look over my shoulder, I tapped the green circle on my phone screen. "Hey Luke, what's going on?"

I only heard kids yelling in the background and a constant stream of air into the phone.

"Luke?"

"Hey...Mom, do you think you can come and get me?" His voice cracked, and he sounded exhausted, if not defeated. That wasn't my little ball of fire.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

A high-pitched shrill drew closer. "Luke?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"What's going on?"

"Uh, nothing. Just kids doing kid things. Can you come and pick me up?"

I thought I heard a snuffle. "Sure, but don't you have basketball practice in the school gym?"

"Mom!" He'd cupped his hand over the phone, and his voice sounded demonic.

But I knew that was code for *stop asking questions*.

"I'll be right there. Are you safe?"

"Don't worry, you're not going to have to investigate my murder."

I pulled the phone from my ear as my extremities felt an instant jolt. He knew he'd punched one of my buttons, but now wasn't the time to tell him what I thought about his new strategy.

"I'm on my way." The line went dead before I could tap the red circle, and I walked back to the table and shut my laptop as the gang of three debated our next move.

"I still don't understand how you found this guy." Nick clutched the folder with white knuckles as he paced back and forth, his eyes studying the blue industrial carpet.

"It was really quite simple." Gretchen stepped in front of Brad to ensure she had everyone's full attention.

Brad noticed me closing my laptop very slowly. "Alex, you're off the phone so you can weigh in if you think this guy is a legitimate suspect."

"Guys, I really have to get going. It's Luke."

Turning his body, Brad placed both palms on the table. "Is everything okay?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I mean, I think he's safe right now, but I don't know what's going on."

"How old is he?"

"Eleven, going on twelve."

"Could just be early hormones."

"Yeah." My voice couldn't sound any less convinced. I slid the computer into my oversized purse and gathered up some papers.

"Alex, I think we might have something." Nick walked closer, the bent folder held up like a trophy.

I swiped my phone and held up a digital timer. "You've got sixty seconds. After that, you're on your own."

I surveyed the three faces. It was obvious no was sure they wanted the pressure of time hanging over their heads.

"Okay, I'll take that challenge." Gretchen had raised her tiny hand. She seemed to get smaller every time I saw her. Or maybe I just felt like an Amazon woman.

"Go ahead." I already felt guilty for making Luke wait another minute.

"It wasn't difficult to find a number of people who had made posts on blogs about bombs. Some sounded serious, others even joked about sticking a bomb up a cow's, uh...you know."

"We know what you mean," Brad said with a quick flash of his dimples.

"And?" I rolled my hand like I was a director, my pulse clocking an accelerated pace.

"We know that a lot of people post under different names, either because they're hiding something or they just don't want people to know their real name."

“Embarrassed by themselves. That’s a red flag of some kind,” Nick threw in.

“Well,” Gretchen said, “I’ve got this cool program where I can trace a single blog post across the Internet, and it will start to create a web of traffic related to that person’s IP address.”

“Very technical, Gretchen. Can you translate, please?” Brad crossed his arms, giving off a vibe of a young professor.

She couldn’t stop grinning, maybe because Brad was talking to her, or perhaps because she’d found the proverbial smoking gun. She had my attention.

“Ten seconds and counting,” I said, shouldering my weighted purse.

Gretchen leaped forward a giant step, accidentally ramming her chest into Brad’s elbow.

“Ah, shit.” She clenched her shoulders as her face turned fire-engine red. “Give me a second.”

“Oh, sorry, Gretchen,” Brad said as the SOS turned and walked away from the group. He took a step in her direction.

She waved him off. “I’ll be perfectly okay. It’s not like you hit the Grand Tetons.”

Nick nearly spit into his hand. I just shook my head at the buffoonery, but I felt for Gretchen, in more than one way.

Brad turned toward me and shrugged his shoulders, his face scrunched up like a prune.

“It’s okay. Just pretend you got racked and then someone makes a joke about how small your package is,” Nick said.

I gave him the eye.

“Sorry. I don’t know anything about women.”

“True.”

Brad had a confused look.

Gretchen turned back around while taking a swig of a bottled water she must have picked up from a nearby table.

She took in a deep breath, and Brad gently touched her elbow, saying quietly, “You sure you’re okay?”

She reached down and touched his hand while staring into his blue eyes. “Yes, thank you.” Their eyes locked for a moment.

Maybe there was something there. I was happy for Gretchen, but I was still in a rush.

I cleared my throat and re-saddled my purse.

Gretchen flinched back into the here and now. “My program, right. It scoured the web and started piecing together a profile on this unique IP, which basically means someone sitting at their computer.”

“Can you give me a summary?”

“Sure. In just the last week, this IP address had sixty-three unique visits to various blog sites. Sixty of those were mainly focused on bomb-making.”

I could feel a little tingle in the base of my skull. “The other three?”

“Something about canning various food products or something like that. But I’m not finished. He actually posted two hundred ninety-four times. On average, almost five posts on each blog. And most importantly for each one, he used a different name.”

“That program sounds like a cool little back-pocket tool,” Nick said.

“Believe me, it rocks,” Gretchen said.

“We can’t say it’s perfect yet. This is actually a beta version,” Brad said, shifting his eyes to Gretchen, then over to Nick, who’d pulled up next to me.

I started backpedaling to the door. “Anything else you can share before I walk out the door and never return?”

The group knew me well enough to know I was joking.

“I found one social media post where this man said he hoped all priests were raped like his brother had been in prison.”

I stopped moving and locked eyes with my partner.

“I’ve wondered the same thing, Alex,” he said. “This guy might be related to J. L. Cobb.”

My gut twisted inside out. “Do we have this nut job’s real name?”

“Yes, but something doesn’t add up,” Brad said. “The data we have on the man associated with this IP at his current home address—”

“Name?” I shot back, my blood racing through my veins.

“Arnold Lyons. Shows here he’s age sixty-three. A veteran who has a disability of some kind.”

“What doesn’t add up?” I asked with agitation in my voice.

“According to our records, it states that Arnold Lyons is the half-brother of Cobb.” Brad kept his gaze on me, as I found the back of the nearest chair and used it as a prop, my chest pumping oxygen to my brain so fast I thought I might topple over.

I started shaking my head. “A half-brother who’s almost forty years older?”

Nick opened the folder and scanned the first page. “That’s what the data shows.”

I thought about Cobb’s social-anxiety issues, a symptom of his Asperger’s. He was also remarkably smart, especially in the areas of math and information technology. But I was forced to also recall that he had murdered my husband.

The room grew quiet until I felt a distant vibration from my purse. I pulled out my phone, and I saw a text from Erin.

Got a tennis thing. Won’t be home until after 8. Trish’s parents will give me a ride. Later.

I thumbed a quick response. *What tennis thing?*

The cursor blinked about twenty times.

“Is that Luke?” Nick asked.

“No, my other one.”

“What does she need?”

I glanced up at my partner. “Nothing. I think.”

I moved my eyes back to the screen and typed *Hello?*

A couple of seconds later she replied. *Sorry, Mom. Busy. See you around*

8. *Luv u.*

I emptied my lungs, relieved that Erin seemed to be in a good mood. But I knew that Luke needed me.

“Guys, everything you shared...really, it’s incredible work. I’m intrigued, but also concerned.”

“Because of the relation to Cobb?” Nick asked.

“Of course. If his brother killed people, who’s to say this Arnold Lyons guy hasn’t killed? He’s into bombs, and he’s made at least one inflammatory statement about priests. Do we know if he’s Catholic, went to church a lot as a kid?”

“That much we don’t know yet,” Brad said. “Look, we can sit on this another couple of days. It could give us an opportunity to build a better foundation of data. Confirm his childhood, his relationship with Cobb, his parents.”

I let Brad’s comments marinate amongst the images of the two dead priests and the initial research Gretchen had connected.

“Did Lyons make any specific threats in the three posts?”

“On first glance, nothing direct,” Gretchen said.

“But that only goes back one week,” Brad offered.

“True. More time and I could probably get my program to conduct a deeper scan.”

“How long would it take?” I asked.

“Hard to say, given the limited usage of the tool, as well as other variables that are difficult to predict, including bandwidth of the blogs I’m visiting, how much data is collected, *etc.* If we let it run a good two days, we might be able to go back another four, five, maybe six months.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. It felt warm to the touch, but also like a steel beam had been inserted. I hated feeling this torn. I knew my judgment was being tainted by the mentioning of Cobb’s name, but I wasn’t going to share that with the group. Also, I knew I should be on my way to Luke’s middle school. Damn, Ezzy was worth a million bucks. Well, I didn’t have even twenty extra dollars on me at this time, which only piled on another layer of stress.

I started massaging my temples.

“Where’s this guy’s house?”

“Near the border of Lynn and Saugus, in more of a rural area near a line of woods.”

I licked my cracking lips. “Okay, Nick, tell Jerry we need Special Agents Mason and Silvagni. They’re good. Set up a command post near the suspect’s home and text me the location. I’m going to pick up Luke. I’ll meet you there

in less than an hour.”

Nick gave me a single nod, and I flipped on a heel and headed for the door.

“Alex, you sure you want to do this?” Brad called out. That was a first. Normally, an IA never questioned the call of a special agent.

“More than you know,” I said with my back to him.

Recalling the downtrodden tone of Luke’s voice, I ran out of One Center Plaza, hoping I could make at least one life better today.

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AT Large

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